Alberta School Council Effectiveness: Summary and Findings of the Provincial Consultation

Alberta School Council Review Implementation Activities

July 24, 2004

KALEIDOSCOPE
CONSULTING
Convening Strategic Conversations
#208, 10470 176 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T5S 1L3

ALBERTA LEARNING CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Kaleidoscope Consulting.
Alberta School Council effectiveness: summary and findings of the provincial consultation.

Alberta School Council Review Implementation Activities.
ISBN 0-7785-2623-2

1. Citizen's advisory committees in education - Alberta. 2. Community and school - Alberta. 3. School management and organization - Alberta. 4. Education - Parent participation - Alberta. I. Title. II. Series: Alberta School Council Review Implementation Activities.

LC221.4.C22A3.K14 2004 370.193 12

This publication is available on Alberta Learning's Web Site at:
http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationsystem/schoolcouncils.asp

This school council effectiveness study was conducted as part of the implementation of the recommendations of the School Council Review contained in *School Councils...Next Steps* (1999). The implementation activities were developed by the Implementation Planning Committee, which consists of representatives from partner organizations: the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, the College of Alberta Superintendents, The Alberta Teachers' Association, the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta and Alberta Learning. The study was funded by Alberta Learning to support the partner organizations in their efforts to improve school council effectiveness.

For further information about the school council effectiveness study, contact:
Sharon Campbell, Executive Director
Performance Measurement and Reporting
Alberta Learning
9th Floor, Commerce Place
10155 – 102 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4L5
Phone: (780) 427-8217*
E-mail: measurement.learning@gov.ab.ca

For information on the implementation of recommendations of the School Council Review, contact:
Loraine Steele, Director
Zone 4 Services
Alberta Learning
9th Floor, 44 Capital Boulevard
10044 – 108 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 5E6
Phone: (780) 427-0929*
E-mail: Loraine.Steele@gov.ab.ca

* Toll-free from outside the Edmonton area, dial 310-0000

Please note: The views and recommendations presented in this report are those of the study participants and the consultant and are not necessarily those of Alberta Learning.

Copyright © 2004, the Crown in Right of Alberta as represented by the Minister of Learning, Alberta Learning, Edmonton, Alberta. Permission is given by the copyright owner to reproduce this publication for educational purposes and on a non-profit basis.

105-04176/

Table of Contents

	Page
Executive Summary and Recommendations	1
I. Prologue	7
II. Organization of the Report	10
III. Context	10
IV. Consultation Process or Data Gathering	11
V. Data Analysis	12
VI. Reflecting on Experiences	12
a) Most Meaningful Experiences	12
b) Most Challenging Experiences	14
VII. Characteristics of an Effective School Council	16
a) Assessment of the Characteristics of an Effective School Council	17
b) Elements of Effectiveness	18
c) Assessment of School Council Effectiveness	19
d) Discussion and Strategies for Each Set of Characteristics	22
i) Purpose of a School Council	22
ii) Membership	24
iii) Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships	29
iv) Communication	35
VIII. Conclusions	40
IX. Recommendations for Going Forward	45
Appendices:	
1. Summary of Strategies for Improving Effectiveness	49
2. Assessment of School Council Effectiveness by Participant Groups	56
3. Data Gathering Instrument for Focus Groups and Interviews	58

Executive Summary

Recommendation 10.0 of the Alberta School Council Review provides direction for an ongoing review process on the role and the effectiveness of school councils. The Implementation Activity Plan identifies that this review be conducted through qualitative research methods using focus groups and interviews.

Preliminary research on school councils, parent groups and organizations conducted by Alberta Learning provided background for the development of the Characteristics of Effective School Councils (page 16). The list of characteristics served as a basis for the discussions with framing and probing questions used to draw out insights and provoke critical thinking about the roles and effectiveness of school councils.

In the spring of 2004, a facilitator conducted 11 focus groups with members of school councils representing the range of schools and jurisdictions in the province (public, separate, francophone, rural, suburban, urban, north, central, and south) and 28 interviews (overall) with trustees and school principals from schools participating in the focus groups. A summary of results and recommendations is presented below.

Common themes

Every participant involved in this study held a sincere and authentic desire to work together as a school community to provide the best school environment and learning opportunities possible for Alberta's students. Themes that emerged from the discussions that affect school councils' ability to fulfill their role are listed below (details on pages 8 and 9 of the report).

- Dedication to playing a role in supporting learning
- The question of membership and representation
- Evolution and developmental stages of school councils
- Council and school leadership
- Relationship between principal and school council
- The fundraising dilemma
- Scope of involvement

Assessment of School Council Effectiveness

Each focus group and interview included an assessment of the Characteristics of an Effective School Council (see page 16 for the list of characteristics used as the basis for the discussions). The following three tables present the results of a Likert scale assessment of the characteristics, aggregated for each participant type in the focus groups and interviews.

1. The five characteristics deemed most important by the three stakeholder groups:

Councils	*Principals*	*Trustees*
▪ Seek input from parents and school community	▪ Seek input from parents and the school community	▪ Have clearly defined and achievable goals
▪ Respect the roles and responsibilities of and cooperate with others	▪ Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	▪ Establish constructive relationships with principal and board

▪ Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	▪ Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities	▪ Seek input from parents and school community
▪ Have an appropriate focus	▪ Have an appropriate focus	▪ Have an appropriate focus
▪ Inclusive membership recruitment process	▪ Have clearly defined and achievable goals	▪ Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters

2. The areas where participants felt councils are doing well:

Councils	*Principals*	*Trustees*
▪ Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	▪ Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	▪ Respect the roles and responsibility of and cooperate with others
▪ Respect the roles and responsibility of and cooperate with others	▪ Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	▪ Establish constructive relationships with principal and board
▪ Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	▪ Inclusive membership recruitment process	▪ Have an appropriate focus
▪ Consult with principal on issues of interest to parents	▪ Respect the roles and responsibility of and cooperate with others	▪ Have clearly defined and achievable goals
▪ Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council	▪ Receive feedback on input provided	▪ Receive feedback on input provided

3. The areas that need the most development:

Councils	*Principals*	*Trustees*
▪ Membership is representative of the entire school community	▪ Seek input from parents and school community	▪ Membership is representative of the entire school community
▪ Have an appropriate focus	▪ Have an appropriate focus	▪ Inclusive membership recruitment process
▪ Have clearly defined and achievable goals	▪ Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council	▪ Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council
▪ Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities	▪ Promote the councils purpose, activities, and results with parents and school community	▪ Seek input from parents and school community
▪ Inclusive membership recruitment process	▪ Have clearly defined and achievable goals	▪ Promote the council's purpose, activities and results with parents and the school community

There was considerable similarity among the groups on the three questions, as well as similarity between the characteristics councils and principals considered important and those they identified as needing work. For example, all three groups identified "have an appropriate focus" as important and both principals and council members also identified "have an appropriate focus" as needing improvement.

There were contrasting views among the groups as well. Both principals and trustees felt that carrying out activities that further the purpose of the council needed improvement, while school council members felt this was an area where they were doing well. It is noteworthy that, while principals and trustees felt that they were doing well providing feedback to school councils on their input, and councils did not identify it in the top five areas for improvement, 20 of the 71 focus group participants gave school and board administration a rating of less than 5 on a 10-point scale (page 39) on providing feedback. (See pages 7-39 for a detailed discussion of the assessment of school council effectiveness.)

Presentation of the above results organized by respondent type (council member, trustee, and principal) for each question can be found in Appendix 2, pages 56-57. In addition to assessing and commenting on the characteristics, participants identified a number of effective strategies they had used. These strategies are contained throughout the report and summarized in Appendix 1, pages 49-55.

In the discussions, participants also provided advice on improving the effectiveness of school councils. The commonality among the three stakeholder groups (school council members, principals and trustees) is noteworthy. Each indicated that building relationships, improving communication, increasing participation and understanding roles and responsibilities would improve school council effectiveness (see pages 40-42).

As well, participants identified important additional characteristics that they thought should be included and indicated the presentation of the characteristics could be improved (details on pages 17-18):

- Statements that include principal and board in the same sentence should be separated because the relationship with the principal is often quite distinct from the relationship with the board. Many school councils are satisfied with participation at the school level and did not aspire to provide input into "jurisdictional plans, budgets, programs, and policies, etc." Therefore their relationship with the board was not as important as the one with the principal.
- Purpose statements should be clearer and more explicit, e.g. focus on enhancing student learning and the school environment.
- A clearly stated, overarching statement would give the characteristics more meaning and direction.
- Important additional characteristics:
    - Continuity (mentoring, succession planning, etc.)
    - Accepting responsibility for communication and accountability of the council to the larger school community.
    - Focused and skilled leadership – both principal and school council chair.
    - Informed discussion that uses factual information. Council members need timely, concise information so they can provide meaningful input in the discussion of issues.

Recommendations for improving the effectiveness of and for supporting school councils

These consultations provided a wealth of information and advice on ways to enhance the roles and improve the effectiveness of school councils. The most critical concept to improving the effectiveness of school councils was that of *shared responsibility*. School councils are not parent councils. They are comprised of parents, principals and community, student and teacher representatives working together to enhance the learning system for the benefit of students. Therefore, responsibility for improving effectiveness lies with all stakeholders.

The first four recommendations are primarily intended for Alberta Learning and are of interest to the other stakeholders involved in the development and support of school councils.

1. *Honour the unique situation of each council*—School councils are voluntary bodies, in most cases very small voluntary bodies. Participants advise caution about creating an expectation that the volunteers in every school should be or want to be involved in all levels of education or all facets of education within their school. Councils should have the opportunity to understand the potential for their participation, and then be empowered to participate as they see fit.

2. *Minimize regulations and provide guidelines with rationale*—Most councils felt that guidelines with clear desired outcomes would be more beneficial than regulations. They did not feel that mandating requirements like community representatives, regional councils, or the three-year business plan was at all helpful. However, two of the 71 focus group participants felt "more teeth" in the regulations were required.

3. *Support the development of councils with appropriate resources*—"If Alberta Learning is serious about school councils then they must assume some accountability and responsibility in supporting the development of councils" was a very strong message in the consultation. It is important to update and enhance the current resource base with concise, current and accessible resources not only for councils, but also for principals and trustees.

4. *Ask and listen*—Alberta Learning should continue to solicit and listen to input from school councils in the province.

The next group of recommendations are intended for consideration by school jurisdictions.

5. *School boards and jurisdictions should actively foster and facilitate the creation and operation of effective empowered school councils*—There are a number of schools that do not have school councils; there are a number of school councils that are floundering; and there are a number of school councils that meet because, "it is the third Monday of the month," but have limited impact on enhancing learning in the school. In the interviews, a number of trustees reflected that perhaps there was a need for a more proactive role by the jurisdiction in supporting the development of effective school councils if only to ensure the effective use of resources. The creation and maintenance of school councils requires a significant commitment of time by all stakeholders, especially the volunteers and the principals. It is important that this time is being put to good use and benefiting the school and the students.

In the way of an example, one school district in the study has a set of policies regarding school councils and the roles and responsibilities of the board and administration in interacting and supporting councils. These policies are circulated to every council to say "This is our commitment to you." The councils in this jurisdiction are healthy, focused and have meaningful relationships with the board and the principal.

6. *Recognize and support the leadership role of the principal*—All discussions in this study identified the principal as the cornerstone of councils that function effectively. At a minimum, jurisdictions should be clearly articulating and communicating their expectations of the school principal in supporting and enabling authentic and meaningful participation of school councils in matters of significance to the school. Ideally, the division would provide mentoring, coaching and identify accountabilities for this role.

7. *Encourage the use of effective regional gatherings to share information*—A majority of school trustees stated that the most meaningful experience with school councils was when they met with them in some form of regional forum. The elements of effective regional meetings are good planning, relevant topics, opportunities and time for meaningful exchange, and appropriate timing.

8. *Ask meaningful questions to promote genuine dialogue and meaningful participation*—Boards and principals that have strong relationships with school councils, and can clearly articulate the value that councils provide, ask their councils strategic and purposeful questions to elicit insights and gather advice. When they ask questions, they provide information to support the discussion in a form that councils can understand and digest. They ask these questions in a timely manner and they tell the councils how their insights will be used. They do not ask questions about everything, and they do not ask questions where they know that council advice will not influence the decision. When they do ask questions they duly consider the advice or the response in the deliberation process and provide feedback to the councils on how it did influence the decision.

9. *Help councils to understand how and where they can be involved*—The average council member or council does not understand the range of opportunities that exist for council involvement in the learning system. While the responsibility for choosing areas of involvement lies with the council, most participants felt there is an essential leadership role for the board and the principal in informing and educating councils.

The balance of the recommendations refer to actions that councils can take to increase their effectiveness.

10. *Use a strategic planning process to develop a clear focus, define roles and set objectives*—Councils that have a clear sense of purpose and have established strategic focus areas believe and can see how they have a significant positive impact on learning and the school environment. They are also able to attract more participation because people know why they are there and what the expectations are.

    Setting objectives or strategic priorities that align with the key focus areas ensure that councils are carrying out activities that further the purpose of the council. Moreover, it ensures that the council does not get sidetracked by issues or pet projects.

11. *Hold effective meetings—*
    - *Utilize strong leadership to stay focused and effective—A* skilled, informed, and effective chairperson who has a good working relationship with the principal and strong leadership skills is an essential element to an effective council. While few chairpersons come with those skills, it is important to understand and acquire them to fulfill his/her leadership role.

    - *Facilitate creative meetings that balance reporting with discussion, provide learning opportunities, and have defined outcomes*—People are busy. They want to know that their time is valued and they are doing something meaningful. It is not enough to have a list of reports. Meetings need to engage the members in a purposeful discussion that focuses on the school as a whole and ways to enhance the learning environment. Do not overwhelm (or bore) members with copious amounts of information.

12. *Succession planning - T*he expectations and the learning curve of a chairperson and executive can be significant and a tremendous void can be left through turnover in the executive. Continuity of council is often achieved through strategic succession planning. In addition, succession planning facilitates effective turnover of executive positions.

13. *Participate in informed discussions and a utilize a problem solving approach*—Councils have a responsibility to ensure their time is invested in discussions in which they have the information required to make an informed decision and they are spending their time finding solutions by exploring and evaluating alternatives.

14. *Seek input from the broader school community*—The expectation that large numbers of parents will/should actively participate in school council, or that membership will be representative of the entire school community should be recognized as unrealistic. Instead, councils need to acknowledge that, like other volunteer organization, they will only attract a small number of interested and committed parents. However, councils do have a leadership responsibility to find ways to seek input from the broader school community on matters of significance to the school or the jurisdiction. Some participants suggested that this should be one of the key goals or objectives of every council because councils must always be reaching out to the broader community.

15. *Raise the awareness of the role and purpose of school council*—It is generally accepted, with a few exceptions, that the larger school community does not understand the role or purpose of school council. Newsletters are the number one vehicle for communicating and there really is no gauge as to their effectiveness. An effective way to raise the profile and awareness is to actually sponsor or host events that focus on the purpose of council—forums, education sessions, meet the teacher nights, and the annual general meeting. Some councils consistently use tangible examples of their involvement in planning sessions, policy development, staffing, etc. to increase the awareness of the role of council.

A closing recommendation for all stakeholders:

Build relationships—Strong and effective relationships that promote genuine respect, collaboration and authentic participation are critical to the success of school councils and it is the responsibility of all stakeholders to constantly work at developing them.

I. Prologue

Conducting a research project on the effectiveness of school councils in Alberta quickly became a lesson in diversity and individuality. We learned that every school in Alberta is a unique microcosm. Each one has defined culture, which is determined by location, size, socio-economic conditions, cultural diversity, leadership and a myriad of other contextual factors. It then stands to reason that every school council would be unique as well. And, they are.

Throughout the process, it became evident that the commonly-held view of a school council is based on the following perceptions:

- School councils provide a forum for parents, teachers, principals, students and (ideally) community members and the elected representatives to come together for genuine dialogue and collaboration regarding enhancing the education system—most predominantly at the local school level.

- The Government of Alberta has enabled this dialogue and collaboration by "creating a container" through legislation of school councils, which are advisory but have no formal liability or accountability.

- By exploring issues from individual perspectives, each with an equal voice in the discussion, a council provides broad insights, and ultimately advice, about enhancing learning to the decision makers.

- Most councils understand the importance of being in touch with and understanding the unique culture of their school. They see their role as identifying ways to enhance student learning and contributing to a positive school environment by reflecting and responding to that culture.

Within this general context, the nearly forty school councils included in this study have markedly different levels of development, different degrees of understanding of their role and the underlying purpose of a school council, different ways of approaching the work they do, and different capacity to accomplish their goals.

This diversity, and often dichotomy, was illustrated in a variety of ways.

- Within the same school division some schools had active, focused and mature councils, while some schools did not have a school council.

- Some school councils have three-year strategic plans complete with mission and vision statements, while others do little to no planning and react to needs on a month by month basis.

- Some councils have a core of committed volunteers who have been involved in school organizations for 10, 12 and 14 years. Others had frequent and complete turnover in executive and membership.

- Some councils are actively involved in advising principals and boards in policy development, administrative staffing, budget review and three-year plans. Other councils did not know they could be involved. And yet others did not express an interest in being involved in policy discussions.

- Some school councils choose to concern themselves solely with the learning environment in their school, while others (or some of the members) choose to become involved at the jurisdictional and provincial level.

- Some principals regarded their councils as a vital part of their school, whose advice and insights they solicited on all significant decisions for the school. Some principals could not articulate the value the council provided and/or saw them as a fundraising resource for projects determined by the principal.

- Some boards actively involved the councils in budget, visioning, policy review, three-year education planning and leadership staffing. Others had not considered that as a role for councils.

- Some trustees attended every council meeting of the school councils they were designated. Some never attended any meetings.

While there was a great deal of diversity in how stakeholders understood and involved themselves or enabled involvement in school council activities, there were also some very strong themes that were constant in every discussion:

- *Dedication to playing a role in supporting learning*—Every participant in this process demonstrated a sincere and authentic desire to work together as a school community to provide the best school environment and learning opportunities possible for Alberta's students.

- *The question of membership and representation*—Every meeting and every interview in some way addressed the concern about councils not having adequate membership and/or parent participation to provide effective representation of the voice of the school community. Moreover, very few participating councils have been successful at obtaining active and meaningful involvement of a community representative.

- *Councils are continuing to evolve and develop*—All three stakeholder groups (school councils, principals and trustees) strongly agreed that school councils are on a continuous journey of discovery. Participants who have been involved for many years have witnessed councils move through various developmental phases. They noted that when school councils were initially provided for in the *School Act,* some school council members thought they had become the decision makers and were in charge of the school. There were also some gatekeeper principals who were determined to control the involvement of school councils. Both approaches fall outside of the definition of school councils in the *School Act*. For the most part, stakeholders have developed a shared understanding of the role and benefits school councils and are now working together defining, exploring, and refining roles, responsibilities and relationships. Having said that, there are still holdouts on either end of the spectrum. This tends to cause conflict in the school and limits the benefits that a council can provide.

  Factors affecting development include, but are not limited to, leadership and commitment by parents, principals and school boards; clarity about the purpose of a school council and levels of interest by parents in initiating and sustaining a council. It is absolutely critical to appreciate that every council evolves and develops in response to

the school culture at its own pace, and that mandating forms of operation, participation or involvement to every council is pointless.

- *Leadership*—The quality of experience and effectiveness of a council is highly dependent upon the commitment and the skills of the school principal and the council chairperson. The principal has a critical role in creating the environment to empower a council; while a skilful and strategic chairperson is necessary in establishing and maintaining the overall focus and the tone of discussion in each meeting.

- *Relationships*—Participants from all three groups repeatedly stressed that the relationship between the principal and the council was the key element to an effective council. With a climate of trust and respect for the role and value of the council and a respect for the roles and responsibilities of the principal a school council can be an extremely valuable comp ent of the school community. If the mutual respect and trust does not exist, "You can mandate all you like, if you don't respect and value people, it doesn't matter."

- *The fundraising dilemma*—Many school councils and/or the school administrators continue to perceive the primary role of council to be a fundraising mechanism for supporting school enhancement projects (one interpretation of *contributing* to a positive school environment). Moreover, council members, principals and trustees strongly feel that the larger school population continues to perceive school councils as primarily fundraising bodies.

  A few of the councils that participated in the focus groups have made clear and definite distinctions between the school council as an advisory body and the organization that does fundraising for school projects. Most others use of a committee or a separate organization with the same members (holding both meetings on the same evening). Some have not made the distinction at all. This lack of distinction can limit the ability of school councils to move fully into their role as advisors to principals and boards on significant matters pertaining to educational enhancement.

- *Scope of involvement*—The majority of parents and school councils are content to concern themselves with the education of their child and their school. They are not interested in active involvement in jurisdictional matters, although they appreciate receiving information and being asked for their advice about matters that directly affect their school. A select number of parents choose to be involved in provincial education matters on a proactive basis. Some school councils have taken on a reactive advocacy role on issues such as timing of diploma exams, the teachers' strike, funding or other local issues.

All of these themes will be discussed in greater detail in the body of this report as they all affect the ability of a council to fulfil its role, stay focused and be effective.

II. Organization of the Report

This report contains:

- An overview of the consultation process
- Identification of common or overarching themes
- A section which presents the experiences of participants with school councils
- Identification of characteristics of effectiveness that councils, school trustees, and principals considered to be the most important, the areas that they felt councils were doing well, and those most in need of development
- A synthesis of key points from the discussions
- Strategies that councils are using to support effectiveness
- Advice from stakeholders on increasing the effectiveness of school councils
- Recommendations for going forward

III. Context

School councils were established in legislation in 1994 to increase parent and community involvement in the education of children in Alberta. The current School Councils Regulation came into effect in 1998. All public schools, including charter schools, must provide the opportunity for the formation of school councils which must include the school principal, a teacher representative, parents of students enrolled in the school, a community representative who is not the parent of a child in the school, and a student representative (high school students only). Parents must form the majority of the members. Each school council may make bylaws. Through school councils, Albertans assume an advisory role in education matters ranging from academic programs to school policies and budgeting.

The 1998 School Council Review of school council effectiveness involved gathering input from school council members, school boards and the general public. The recommendations contained in the report were subsequently reviewed with over 3,000 Albertans, including representatives from school councils throughout Alberta and education stakeholder organizations. In 2002, Implementation Activity Plans were developed to address specific recommendations of the School Council Review.

This project focuses on School Council Review Recommendation 10.0—reviewing the role and the effectiveness of school councils on an on-going basis.

Recommendation 10.0
That the Minister review the role and effectiveness of school councils in five years and that Alberta Learning continue to review the effectiveness of councils on an ongoing basis.

Government Response: Accept: School councils are still evolving and a review in five years will help determine if further changes are needed to increase their effectiveness. The type of review required (e.g. public consultation, etc.) will be determined by education partners.

The implementation Activity Plan for Recommendation 10 includes:

- Hold focus groups on the effectiveness of school councils throughout the province that would include a representative provincial sample of school councils (chairperson and a member at-large).
- Conduct one-on-one interviews on the effectiveness of school councils with principals and trustees from the provincial sample of school councils.
- Prepare a report and summary of findings on the Review of the Effectiveness of School Councils. (Note: Baseline data from this report will be used for comparative purposes in future research.)

An ad hoc advisory committee consisting of representatives of:

- Alberta Learning
- Alberta Home and School Councils' Association
- Alberta School Boards Association
- The Alberta Teachers' Association

developed the characteristics of effectiveness and provided input into the project.

IV. Consultation Process or Data Gathering

The consultation process primarily focused on the collection of qualitative and anecdotal data. The project facilitator convened eleven focus groups with members of school councils representing the range of schools and jurisdictions in the province (public, separate, francophone, rural, suburban, urban, north, central, and south). Focus groups were held in St. Albert, Hanna, Red Deer, Lac La Biche, Lethbridge, Calgary, Okotoks, Edmonton, Grande Prairie, Whitecourt and Wetaskiwin. The names of the participants and their schools are confidential.

The focus groups were organized through the support of Alberta Learning Field Services Branch representatives. This followed the protocol of Field Services being the first point of contact with school jurisdictions. Two representatives (the chairperson and another member of the same council) from four school jurisdictions were invited to each meeting, with a target of eight people per meeting. The actual groups ranged from three to thirteen participants with a total of seventy-one school council members involved. Experience of participants ranged from fifteen years of involvement with school councils to first-year members.

After each focus group, at least one principal and one designated school board trustee from the participating schools were interviewed and asked the same questions as the focus group participants. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with representatives from seventeen school jurisdictions; twelve with trustees and sixteen with school principals.

The intention of including school council members, principals and trustees in separate discussions was to provide balance to the discussion regarding the characteristics of effective council operation and to reflect the experiences of all of the stakeholders while enabling candour of the participants.

V. Data Analysis

The data gathered in the consultation process was analyzed in the following ways.

- The results of the three categories (school councils, principals, and trustees) were synthesized individually and analyzed for evident themes or anomalies
- The themes from each category were compared for similarities and differences
- The data was then synthesized into a discussion synopsis and strategies for continued development or increased effectiveness

VI. Reflecting on Experiences

Each conversation in the consultation process was initiated by asking participants to identify their most meaningful and then their most challenging experiences with school councils. (We asked council members who had a long-term involvement in school councils to focus their remarks to post-legislation activity.)

We asked these questions to gather anecdotal information about how councils and council members felt their efforts are really making a difference, or the barriers they need to overcome to achieve increased effectiveness.

The following section outlines the themes from the discussions separated into stakeholder groups.

a) Most Meaningful Experiences

The most meaningful experiences identified by **school council members** included:

- *Event or program sponsorship—A* number of councils named specific programs that they had sponsored, or cosponsored, that they felt made a difference in the quality of learning opportunities. This included Artist-in-Residence, an after-school band program, the Effective Behaviour Support program, a city-wide Literacy and Learning conference, hot lunch programs, and various reading programs. Others stated that sponsoring and building the new playground was the most meaningful event, not in and of itself, but because of the culmination of years of effort that so many people put into a large and daunting undertaking. To council members who cited this type of activity, "contributing to a supportive learning environment" generally meant using fundraising to support program enhancement.

- *Involvement in key decisions*—"We participated in the hiring of a new principal, or the three-year planning process, or the visioning process or the budget review." Council members who cited this type of activity valued their role in advising principals and boards on matters of importance or significance in the learning system.

- *Collaborating as equal partners*—Being treated as equals, with an equal voice, in areas like developing a list of desired characteristics for new administrators, or designing a new school was especially meaningful. "Our voice and opinions were equally as valued as other stakeholders." It must be noted that, while this was identified as a meaningful experience, most council members appreciated that they are volunteers, without accountability, and they are not equal partners.

- *Building relationship or community between people serving a common purpose*—Working as an empowered team to enhance learning, the experience of relationship, and the feeling of appreciation for their efforts were all identified as meaningful.

- *Participating in lively debate and discussion about significant education issues*—The ability to hold discussions where a variety of views are provided and listened to, underpinned by the understanding that all are dedicated to a common purpose, was extremely meaningful (and the reason they participated) for several school council members.

- *Internal development or planning activities*—Investing the time and effort into developing a mission and vision, goals and strategies for the council because it gave them a clear sense of purpose and focus.

- *Advocacy efforts*—Becoming involved in advocacy or lobbying campaigns to address issues within the learning system (e.g. scheduling of diploma exams, or involvement in Alberta Home and School Councils' Association) provided a sense of having a say in the education system.

- *Learning opportunities*—Provincial leadership and The Alberta Home and School Councils' Association (AHSCA) conferences to in-services or learning segments at regular meetings that provided increased understanding of the school system and enabled them to better participate in an informed discussion.

- *Managing adversity and conflict*—Taking a leadership role in managing conflict or controversy ranging from the teacher's strike to internal issues.

Trustees agreed with many of those experiences with the following comments unique to this group:

- Opportunities to bring a number of councils together to discuss system-wide education issues and provide a broader perspective, and to learn from each other was often identified as the most meaningful experience by trustees.

- No trustee identified fundraising or program sponsorship as the most meaningful experience.

- Being involved in council strategic planning sessions.

Principals also agreed with many of the items from the parent list but specifically identified the following items as meaningful:

- The insights and advice they receive from school council on matters of educational significance.

- The support they received from the council in creating a positive school environment.

- School councils participating in their own planning process to ensure they are purposeful, focused and effective.

- The advocacy role that councils have assumed regarding matters of importance to school effectiveness.

- To a lesser degree—special programs or activities supported by council. These never included field trips, playgrounds or the like, but did include artist-in-residence, Effective Behaviour Support, extra-curricular band programs, a student voucher program, etc.

b) Most Challenging Experiences

School council members said they had been challenged by:

- *Adequate parent involvement*—Many of the participating council members stated that their regular council meetings were attended by five to ten parents, with a very few having fifteen to twenty, in spite of a variety of recruitment processes. They noted that the school volunteer programs and the fundraising committee had more active participation, but only a minimal number of parents were interested in participating in the advisory role. A major aspect of this challenge was their concern about adequately representing the views of the entire school community with so few people participating.

- *Recognition by principals and the board as having a value-added contribution to make*—This challenge covered a spectrum of responses ranging from councils who were not consulted at all about matters of educational significance by either their principal or the board, to some council members who desired to be involved in all decisions made in the school and by the board. It must be stressed that there is a distinct difference between being informed, being consulted on, and participating in decision-making.

- *Continuity*—A large turnover in council membership, and more specifically the executive, had a significant impact on the capacity of the council to function without starting over every few years. The turnover was especially a challenge in K-3 or even K-6 schools where parents were new to school councils. In these schools there was a significant learning curve and the parents moved on once they became knowledgeable.

- *Maintaining focus on the whole school*—Many parents initially come to school council because they have an interest in their child's class, or issues relating to their child's education. Creating and maintain a focus on school-wide issues and not getting waylaid by individual concerns or interests requires significant leadership skills.

- *The demands on volunteers*—Despite the tremendous potential for how councils can be involved in school and learning enhancement, there are limits to what volunteers can do. Also, there are a finite number of parents who have the time or the will to dedicate the amount of time it takes to participate in informed, purposeful activities. For some councils, this underlined the need for specific goals and strategies that outlined how the council would make a contribution. For other councils, it presented the dilemma of being dragged off madly in all directions.

- *Effective information sharing with and gathering from the larger school community*—Councils strive to involve the larger school community in their activities and definitely want to raise awareness of the work of council. Although they use newsletters, websites, surveys, etc, to communicate many said that it was like sending information into a black hole because nothing ever came back.

Principals are challenged by:

- *Parent involvement*—Because of low participation rates, a limited number of parents are speaking for the whole community on significant issues such as discipline policies, dress codes, school vacations, program development etc. Principals feel it is important to find ways to consult with the broader school community.

- *Continuity*—Large and frequent turnover in council membership means that everyone has to start over in developing relationships, obtaining informed input, etc.

- *Involving councils in matters of significance to education*—Finding ways and remembering to involve councils in matters of significance is a challenge to some principals. Timing and the need for a rapid response were often cited as factors.

- *Vested interest or vocal minority voices*—Some parents come to council with a specific issue that they belabour. This takes time away from the focus of council and creates frustration for council members who see and want to focus on the bigger picture of the school as a whole.

Trustees are challenged by:

- *Having councils look beyond their school to education within the division.*

- *Competition for resources amongst schools without an understanding of the complexity and need for division-wide decisions.*

- *Parent involvement*—A limited number of parents are speaking for the whole community

- *Effective ways to communicate with the number of councils*—To explain how decisions are made, consult on policy, bring forth division-wide issues.

- *Diversity of councils* - Levels of maturity, focus, etc. and the desire to have consistency throughout the division.

- *Involving council in matters of significance to education* - Finding ways and remembering to include council in appropriate areas affecting enhancing education.

- *Encouraging principals to actively involve school councils in their advisory role* - Trustees acknowledged that some principals were not assuming their leadership responsibility in facilitating council creation and development in their schools.

- *Geography* - Large geographic regions make communication or using a tool like regional meetings difficult.

VII. Characteristics of an Effective School Council

Research on school councils, parent groups and organizations conducted by the ad hoc committee resulted in the development of the following characteristics of effective school councils.

Purpose

- Have an appropriate focus (e.g., enhancing student learning by contributing to the positive school environment)
- Have clearly defined, achievable goals (e.g. advising principal and board on matters the council considers important)

Membership

- Are representative of the entire school community, including those specified in legislation and regulation
- Have an inclusive membership recruitment process

Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships

- Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- Establish constructive relationships with principal and board
- Carry out activities that further the purpose, including those specified in legislation and regulation
- Provide input to principal and board on important matters, e.g. school and jurisdiction plans, budgets, programs, policies, facility use, results
- Respect the roles and responsibilities of and cooperate with others (e.g. teachers, principals, jurisdiction administrators, other parent organizations)

Communication

- Promote the council's purpose, activities and results with parents and the larger school community
- Consult with principal on issues of interest to parents
- Seek input from parents and the school community
- Receive feedback on advice provided

Using the Characteristics of Effective School Councils as the discussion focus

The list of characteristics served as a basis for the discussions with framing and probing questions used to draw out insights and provoke critical thinking about the roles and effectiveness of school councils. The consultation process approached the discussion of effective school councils in a number of ways.

a) Participants were asked to review the characteristics and to comment if these statements were indicative of an effective school council or whether other characteristics were missing.
b) Before we asked the participants to respond to the Characteristics of an Effective Council (the Characteristics) developed by the subcommittee, we asked them to describe effectiveness and moreover, the outcomes that would be realized through an effective school council. We also asked what practices supported or presented barriers to effectiveness. We did this to test if the Characteristics identified by the ad hoc committee aligned with the experiences of effectiveness or ineffectiveness.
c) A Likert scale was used to assess the perceptions of the importance of and the performance levels of school councils for each of the Characteristics. Participants were asked to assess on a scale of 1-10 how well administration and boards were doing on each of the characteristics. (As with all data collection, the experience, knowledge and attitudes of the participants significantly flavoured the results. Also, some trustees assessed the level of importance of the Characteristics but did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to assess performance levels.)

a) Assessment of the Characteristics of an Effective School Council

- Many participants felt that characteristic statements that include principal and board in the same sentence should be separated because the relationship with the principal is often quite distinct from the relationship with the board. Many school councils are satisfied with participation at the school level and did not aspire to provide input into "jurisdictional plans, budgets, programs, and policies, etc." Therefore their relationship with the board was not as important as the one with the principal.

  Several councils stated that they would like to have more interaction with their board but were not afforded that opportunity. Therefore, they assessed the quality of relationship with the two levels significantly differently.

- Some participants felt that characteristics statements needed to be clearer and more explicit. For example, the statements on focus and goals could read:
  - Focus on enhancing student learning and the school environment
  - Understand the purpose of school councils as enhancing student learning and the school environment
  - Clear and achievable goals that directly support the purpose and focus of council
  - Focus on the whole school addressing common needs and not individual issues.

  They believe a clearly stated, overarching statement would give the characteristics more meaning and direction. If there is a clear statement of purpose, councils are more able to establish and maintain an appropriate focus for their efforts and to set clearly defined and achievable goals.

- Some characteristics of an effective council should be added, most specifically:

- *Continuity (mentoring, succession planning etc.)*—Planning for continuity was cited time and again as a characteristic of council effectiveness. Many councils said that their effectiveness was diminished because of turnover in council members. The learning curve is significant, especially for the chairperson. Participants felt that efforts needed to be made to ensure that new executive members were identified early and coached in preparation for their role.
- *Accepting responsibility for communication and accountability of council to the larger school community*—Participants believed that a council that held itself accountable to the larger school population through active, meaningful and strategic communication would be effective.
- *Focused and skilled leadership*—In most situations leadership was seen as a shared responsibility between the chairperson and the principal, each with a different role. The voluntary nature of the council required strong leadership to ensure it achieved its purpose.
- *Informed discussion*—Council must use factual information in its discussion and deliberation. Council members can be more effective when they are provided with timely, concise and effective information and learning opportunities so they can add value through their participation in the discussion. Council members acknowledge their responsibility in staying abreast of issues and matters affecting the learning system by accessing speakers, divisional resources, and sharing reading materials.

b) Elements of Effectiveness

When participants were asked to identify elements of effectiveness, many of the comments aligned very closely with the characteristics statements developed by the ad hoc committee. The following statements were identified repeatedly by all three groups and warranted explicit mentioning as indicators of effectiveness as seen by people directly involved in councils.

- *Strong relationships*—The strength and effectiveness of a school council lies in the strength and effectiveness of relationships among council, board and administration. Mutual trust and respect is built through open and honest discussion and is essential to building relationships.

- *Strategic planning*—While some council members did not feel that setting short and/or long term goals was a priority for them, those that did felt it was the crux to meaningful involvement in supporting their school.

- *The **primary** focus of the council is the advisory role in education matters/enhancing learning*—It is important that councils understand and focus on advising administration and the board in making the best educational decisions for the children in the school.

- *Voice of council is representative of the school community*—Recognizing that only a small number of people are willing to make a commitment to regular participation in the advisory role of council, the council should actively seek out the voice of the larger school community in the identification of council priorities and in responding to important issues. Consultation with other parents is essential.

- *A safe and respectful environment to question and discuss*—Several principals and chairpersons felt that an effective council was one in which parents and community

representatives felt able to bring questions and opinions to the table without risk or fear. Creating this environment in large part falls to an effective chairperson who can listen, clarify, and maintain a focus on the role and purpose of council by channelling issues to the appropriate place in an objective and respectful manner.

- *A problem solving/goal oriented process*—Focus is maintained and results achieved by clarifying the issue, gathering the information needed, examining alternatives, and identifying desired outcomes and strategies to achieve the goal. Using a problem-solving approach reduces the chances of straying away from the purpose of council and/or wasting time in fruitless discussion.

- *Authentic involvement and meaningful input*—
  - Input on significant school and education matters is sought in a timely and appropriate manner
  - Input is requested at the beginning of a process not the end
  - Councils understand whether and why they have a vote or voice
  - Input is listened to and considered
  - Lively discussion and debate are positive indicators
  - Information on decisions is shared and use of input is rationalized

- *Utilizing the efforts of volunteers strategically*—Councils recognize that strategic investment of volunteer time, enabling volunteers to contribute in areas where they are interested or skilled, will provide more effective results for the school.

- *Value-added impact on the school*—Councils that plan and implement action make a discernable difference in enhancing teaching and learning as opposed to "being there because it is the first Monday of the month."

- *Working as a team*—Parents, teachers, the principal, the trustee, the community representative, and the student representatives all consider themselves as equals serving a common goal, each with a unique role.

c) Assessment of School Council Effectiveness

As previously stated a Likert Scale assessment was used to focus the conversation towards more in depth discussions. This instrument provided a solid indication of the characteristics that were seen as extremely important, as well as identifying where councils were doing well and where there was the greatest need for development. The key results of these ratings are provided in the tables that follow.

1. The five characteristics deemed most important by the three stakeholder groups:

Councils	*Principals*	*Trustees*
▪ Seek input from parents and school community	▪ Seek input from parents and the school community	▪ Have clearly defined and achievable goals
▪ Respect the roles and responsibilities of and cooperate with others	▪ Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	▪ Establish constructive relationships with principal and board
▪ Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	▪ Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities	▪ Seek input from parents and school community
▪ Have an appropriate focus	▪ Have an appropriate focus	▪ Have an appropriate focus
▪ Inclusive membership recruitment process	▪ Have clearly defined and achievable goals	▪ Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters

2. The areas where participants felt councils are doing well:

Councils	*Principals*	*Trustees*
▪ Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	▪ Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	▪ Respect the roles and responsibility of and cooperate with others
▪ Respect the roles and responsibility of and cooperate with others	▪ Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	▪ Establish constructive relationships with principal and board
▪ Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	▪ Inclusive membership recruitment process	▪ Have an appropriate focus
▪ Consult with principal on issues of interest to parents	▪ Respect the roles and responsibility of and cooperate with others	▪ Have clearly defined and achievable goals
▪ Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council	▪ Receive feedback on input provided	▪ Receive feedback on input provided

3. The areas that need the most development:

Councils	*Principals*	*Trustees*
▪ Membership is representative of the entire school community	▪ Seek input from parents and school community	▪ Membership is representative of the entire school community
▪ Have an appropriate focus	▪ Have an appropriate focus	▪ Inclusive membership recruitment process
▪ Have clearly defined and achievable goals	▪ Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council	▪ Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council

▪ Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities	▪ Promote the councils purpose, activities, and results with parents and school community	▪ Seek input from parents and school community
▪ Inclusive membership recruitment process	▪ Have clearly defined and achievable goals	▪ Promote the council's purpose, activities and results with parents and the school community

It should be noted that other characteristics were ranked closely behind those listed here. Including the top seven or eight characteristics in each category would have shown even more similarities among the three groups.

Some interesting patterns in the results:

- All three groups felt that *Seek input from parents and the school community* was very important, with the principals and trustees feeling that this was an area of effectiveness that needed development or attention by councils. (School councils ranked it highly, but not in the top five.)

- All three groups ranked "*Have an appropriate focus*" as important and the councils and principals identified it as an area needing development.

- Principals and trustees shared four areas in the top five important characteristics
  - *Seek input from parents and school community*
  - *Establish constructive relationships with the board and principal*
  - *Have an appropriate focus*
  - *Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities*

- Principals and trustees also shared three areas as needing improvement:
  - *Seek input from parents and school community*
  - *Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council*
  - *Promote the council's purpose, activities and results with parents and the school community*

- While both principals and trustees felt that *Carrying out activities that further the purpose of council* needed improvement, council members felt it was something they were doing well.

- *Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities* was identified by school council members as needing improvement. Trustees and principals listed in the top five for importance and felt, for the most part, that councils were doing quite well in honouring roles and responsibilities.

- The areas for improvement rankings and discussions with the trustees illustrate that they would like to see councils concentrate on actively involving and increasing the interaction with the larger school community and parent body.

d) Discussion and Strategies for Each Set of Characteristics

In the following sections the discussions on each of the characteristics is summarized and strategies for increased effectiveness that were identified by participants are listed.

i) Purpose of a School Council

Characteristic Statements presented in Characteristics of Effective School Councils

- Have an appropriate focus (e.g. enhancing student learning by contributing to the positive school environment)
- Have clearly defined, achievable goals (e.g. advising principal and board on matters the council considers important)

Participants were asked:

- Do members of the council and the larger school community understand the purpose of the school council?
- How do you establish your focus?

Discussion

- Participants felt that most council members did have clarity about the legislated purpose of school councils, but that the larger school community and the larger community did not. "Until you are involved, you don't have a clue about the potential input you have...If people knew we had a voice in the school, they would be here...A very small percentage knows you can sit in on interviews, see the budget, or advise on policy." The challenge is to find ways to increase the understanding of the purpose of school councils.

- Participants felt that there continues to be murkiness about the purpose of the school councils. The general perception by the larger community is that school councils are fundraising organizations that "support a positive school environment" by raising money to support programs and services in the school. In fact, some of the council members and principals who participated in the process also considered fundraising as the primary purpose of their councils.

- To a lesser degree, councils are perceived as volunteer resource for special events.

- There was a wide range of perceptions about the scope of involvement. The spectrum ranged from my child, his/her class, the school, the jurisdiction to provincial education issues. Most participants believed that primary focus or purpose is being effective in their advisory role at the local school level.

- The more developed councils, especially, but not only, those that are active in Alberta Home and School Council Association (AHSCA), tend to have a clear picture of the purpose of council as advising the principal and board on matters of policy, budget, planning, etc. This clarity of purpose is supported by school council plans with mission statements, specific goals and objectives.

- Leadership in action and focus is important in developing and demonstrating a clear purpose for councils. If meetings continue to focus on allocating resources, individual

class or student issues, or tedious reporting, the council will not fulfill its purpose. Leaders must ensure that the council is investing its time in efforts related to the purpose, focus and goals.

- Councils would benefit by clearly communicating the purpose of the school council and moreover, clearly describing the difference between the fundraising function and the advisory function to the larger school community.

- While some councils use strategic planning processes, many do not. Their activity is agenda driven and responsive to issues that arise from the school or the principal or other school staff. "We do what we do every year...We look at the school calendar and see what needs to be added in. Then we try to implement more every year." Or, "We fit the needs of the school." Regardless of the process, councils stressed that flexibility to be able to respond to emerging issues is essential.

- Council members stated there is a distinct difference in the focus of high school and elementary school councils. Elementary schools focus more on programs and high schools focus more on the political side and broader education issues.

Strategies to support clarity of purpose, focus and goal setting

- *Provide concise and clear information to parents about the types of things that councils deal with regarding matters of significance to education*, i.e. policy, school planning etc. Provide tangible examples of actions and results.

- *Break the fundraising role perception*—Totally separate the two functions. People who sat on the fundraising organization did not belong to the school council and vice versa. Once they got past the fear of not having enough volunteers, they realized they were appealing to two different types of volunteers. Those that gave lip-service to establishing distinction by having two separate meetings on the same evening were not as successful at developing and sustaining clarity of purpose. Other participants suggested that councils were mature enough to manage both the advisory and the fundraising role and that school councils should challenge the direction from the government that they needed to be separated.

- *Use a variety of methods for sharing information*—
  - Do not rely on the newsletter as an effective means of getting your information out
  - Have a presence and make presentations at key school events
  - Use brochures or small handbooks that can provide a taste of the purpose of school councils
  - Provide testimonials from members about the effect the council has on the learning environment

- *Ask good, strategic questions of the parent body*—Illustrate the purpose, focus and goals of council by asking questions on matters of significance to the school.

- *Clearly identify the strategies that will be used to accomplish the goals*—Engage parents in meaningful, learning focused activities. Seek volunteer support to accomplish each specific goal.

- *Use planning as an outreach and focusing tool* -
  - It is important that the visioning, goal setting, strategy development process include genuine outreach to the broader school community. Having broader input into the direction setting enabled council to proceed with some assurance that they were acting on behalf of the school community. Planning ensures that the council is in a position to provide timely input to key aspects of school and board operation
  - Councils have engaged the services of the local Business Development Corporation or Alberta Community Development to assist them in developing three-year plans
  - Some councils have held vision and mission retreats to identify their overarching purpose and goals and then annually identify strategies that would further the fulfilment of the goals

- *Have principals make presentations to councils outlining the three-year school plan* - Council can then decide where and how they can support enhancing student learning and building a positive school environment by aligning their activities with the school plan.

- *Principal and councils can just sit down together to identify areas that they can work together in a spirit of trust and respect to support the school.*

- *Ensure sufficient flexibility* - Ability to respond to emerging issues is essential.

ii) Membership

Characteristic Statements presented in Characteristics of Effective School Councils regarding Membership

- Are representative of the entire school community, including those specified in legislation and regulation
- Have an inclusive membership recruitment process

Participants were asked:

- How do you recruit members?
- What are the challenges you face?
- What has worked well in overcoming the challenges?

Discussion

The Membership/Representation/Involvement Question

- The School Act Section 22 (2) states that the majority of members of school councils must be parents of students enrolled in the school. Membership is fully defined in Alberta Regulation 171/98: School Councils Regulation, and must include the principal of the school, a high school student (for schools offering high school programs) elected by the high school students in the school, a teacher elected by the teachers in the

school, and at least one person who either is not a parent of a student in the school or is a parent of a child enrolled in an Early Childhood Program at the school.

- All three groups identified membership, parent involvement and/or representation as the greatest challenge for school councils. Their dilemma is about whether the small group of dedicated people adequately represent the voice of the school community.

    - There are a finite and small number of parents and community members who are interested in investing time on a regular basis to discussing policy, budget, school results, etc.
    - Most schools have healthy volunteer programs but limited participation in school council
    - There are a number of schools in the province that can not recruit enough volunteers to even start a school council
    - Some people who would like to participate in council are turned off by unfocused discussion, inappropriate focus, etc.
    - Some council members said they would rather have a small group of committed participants who are passionate about education and are supported by a cadre of volunteers who would rather be involved in defined projects and specific activities
    - Councils appear to rely very heavily on the school newsletter as the primary recruitment tool. They also attended key school events to raise their profile
    - Sustaining membership throughout the year was also identified as an issue. Attrition in council membership occurs for a number of reasons including volunteers being overwhelmed with the expectations and/or a feeling that there was not sufficient opportunity for meaningful participation
    - Many stakeholders unconsciously perceive the "council" as the parent body with the principal, teacher representative, community representative as adjuncts, but not part of the council. An interesting indicator was the use of the pronouns—councils that took an inclusive team approach to working together towards a common purpose used "we" in their descriptions, while councils that had less developed relationships talked about "they"
    - The impact on focus and progress by fluctuating involvement of parents was identified as an issue. While the role of council as a conduit between parents and the school is important, some chairpersons found that parents attending intermittently to discuss individual issues was a daunting challenge (although they stressed they were welcome)
    - Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIPP) is a barrier to contacting parents directly
    - Many councils feel they are missing the masculine voice on their councils as they predominantly consist of women
    - It was stressed that councils can not equate the number of people in the room with representation of the school community
    - It was also stressed that membership, or people attending meetings, was not the only (or even the most effective) way to obtain representation from the school community
    - Principals and trustees told us that in view of limited participation in school councils they used other methods or avenues to solicit input from the school community

Strategies councils have used to address the membership/representation/involvement dilemma

- *Strategic recruitment*—
  - Some councils have recognized that it is not so much about the number of people involved as about strategically involving people who are active in and can represent specific voices from various parts of the school community. Identifying the range of voices—sports, arts, grade levels, and other interest areas and strategically recruiting through person to person invitation and identifying the potential mutual value is key to obtaining representative membership in an inclusive manner. While it is time consuming up front, the benefits far exceed the effort
  - "Be very clear about what commitment you want or need from people and then don't expand it once they are there"
  - Target male participation and make sure your meetings are meaningful to them

- *Value-added participation*—When members come for the first time, ensure they are engaged in something that is meaningful to them. Ask people what would be required for them to engage in the process.

- *Provide training and orientation processes* to reduce the learning curve and ensure people's time is valued.

- *Personal invitation*—Whether using a strategic recruitment process or not, personal invitation is imperative. Success has been achieved by inviting people to participate because they have something to contribute and, sometimes, helping them identify what that "something" is.

- *Using volunteers strategically*—One council coined the phrases "Marathoners and Sprinters". They identified the preferred level of involvement and utilized volunteers appropriately within that scope.

- *Start with one small job*—Inviting people to participate in some small, defined way is an excellent way to initiate them to council.

- *Using meetings that engage participants as a retention tool*—Councils experiencing success with involvement by parents, teachers, community representatives and students etc., and with retaining new members, attributed a large part of their success to the content and structure of their meetings:
  - Brief presentations providing opportunities to learn what is happening in the school and/or community
  - Opportunities to learn more about the education or learning system
  - Meetings planned to focus on the goals of council and their implementation rather than rote agendas
  - Meetings that focused on discussion rather than reporting
  - ***Concise*** oral reports that evoke discussion
  - Time for fun, food and community building
  - Leadership by the chairperson and the principal in identifying a key discussion areas and asking effective questions
  - Not getting caught up in minutia or issues outside of the scope or role of council
  - Sub committees to deal with implementation of strategies

- A segment of the agenda to deal with individual issues

- *Credibility as a recruitment tool*—Participants stated that if the council was doing important work, the mere credibility of the process would attract valuable members.

- *We find ways to make it work*—Teams or co-representatives, rotating representation etc. The basic guideline is not to get hung up on rules, be clear on your goal, ("Is your goal lots of members or is your goal meaningful participation?") and be innovative.

- *Mentoring, education and succession planning to ensure continuity*—
  - Many participants felt that a turnover, or limited term, of the executive was positive, and necessary, as long as a mentoring and education process was in place to limit the learning curve of new executive
  - Some councils used communication with feeder schools' councils to identify and nurture potential members

The community representative

One of the requirements of school councils is that they include someone from the community, who does not have a student in the school, as a member. This has often been a parent of an ECS child because of the distinction between child and student in the School Act. Otherwise the council would not have a community representative. However, as these individuals are parents of children in the school, the views of those who do not have children in the school are not reflected.

Participants were asked:

- What benefits can/do community representatives provide to school councils?
- Have you been successful in obtaining meaningful participation by a community representative?
- What are the barriers to meaningful participation?
- What has worked in overcoming those barriers?
- Are there other ways to get input from the broader community?

Discussion

- Recruiting and retaining community representatives is a major challenge for school councils, one that many councils do not place as a priority. To quote, "We have enough of a problem getting parent members; we can't worry ourselves about community representatives."

- All participants were asked to identify the benefits that community representatives can/do provide to school councils. The responses were fairly consistent in that they could potentially provide:

  - An objective and external view to issues to counter the "tunnel-vision" that parents can sometimes get
  - A link to community resources to which council would not ordinarily have access
  - A larger "world" view
  - A communication channel to the larger or general community

- information and knowledge about specific topics—financial management, advocacy, safety and security, facility development, culture, and/or religion, and a perspective of a specific segment of the community
- A different, non-vested perspective about education and the education system
- A cooling influence in times of controversy

- Many councils recognized that value of a community representative is contingent upon the chairperson, and other council members, skillfully and strategically eliciting insights of the member. Several participants felt those insights could be found at the table by having members "remove their hats" or provide perspectives from their professional role and not their parental role.

- Some participants stated that their experience with the community representative was not positive and they did not see the value or the return on investment of searching out a community representative. They were not sure there was enough benefit to take valuable time in finding one.

- Tokenism is significant in having a warm body to fill a chair—or to say it is filled. Many councils that have community representatives on their rosters do not have community representatives as active participants at their meetings.

- Those that have had a positive relationship with a community representative would not want to do without one now.

- The barriers to attracting, recruiting and retaining the meaningful involvement of a community representative included:
  - *Time*—finding someone who is not already over-committed
  - *Perceived benefit*—not seeing a benefit to being involved
  - *Awareness*—lack of understanding about the purpose of school councils and/or there has been no invitation extended
  - *Strategic utilization*—not feeling valued or valuable after they start
  - *Meeting fatigue*—if the meetings are not purposeful and focused, they will not keep coming

Strategies for obtaining meaningful involvement of a community representative

- *Meeting a need*—Identify an area within the council focus or goals in which the council has a specific need for support or resources, and then going out and finding a person to fill that need.

- *Develop a partnership with a specific organization*—i.e.: the local community league, the local police force, the Recreation Board, the Community and Family Services Board, the Chamber of Commerce, the local parish.

- *Use the community network*—Strategically identify the skills and knowledge you want in a community member and then use the connections of the council members to find the right person.

- *Searching out passion*—Use networking to identify a non-parent who is passionate about education.

- *Community liaison officer*—In lieu of a community representative, one council has established a position of community liaison officer from its membership.

- *Value and honour the member once you have them*—A community representative can be a key asset to the council, ensure they know that and that the council acknowledges it by how they utilize and treat the community representative.

Finally and importantly, participants did not feel that mandating a community representative was helpful. Many participants identified a variety of ways to create awareness and to elicit input by the broader community. They felt that a guideline on gathering feedback and involving the larger community in a manner that reflected the uniqueness of their school community would be more beneficial and provide councils with autonomy.

Other vehicles for gathering input from the larger community

- Community forums for specific issues
- Participation in other community organizations
- The local newspaper and community league newsletters
- Surveys in the neighbourhood

iii) Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships

Characteristic statements presented in Characteristics of Effective School Councils regarding Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships

- Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- Establish constructive relationships with principal and board
- Carry out activities that further the purpose, including those specified in legislation and regulation
- Provide input to principal and board on important matters, e.g. school and jurisdiction plans, budgets, programs, policies, facility use, results
- Respect the roles and responsibilities of and cooperate with others (e.g. teachers, principals, jurisdiction administrators, other parent organizations)

Participants were asked:

- Does your council have an understanding of the roles, relationships and responsibilities between themselves, the school and the board?
- What are some of the challenges you experienced?
- How have you addressed the challenges?

Discussion

Relationships

Relationships between school councils and principals

- As stated earlier, council members, principals and trustees all felt that a strong and respectful relationship between principals and councils was the key element of an

effective council. For the most part these relationships exist, although some schools certainly felt that their relationships could be strengthened or enhanced.

- Many reasons were cited, from a variety of perspectives, as to why councils and principals might not have strong relationships:

  - Some council members believed that principals were not including them where they could appropriately be included in matters of significance to education and learning
  - Some principals believe that the councils involve themselves in issues that are clearly administrative, thus creating tension
  - Some councils actually are overstepping their roles and mandates
  - A chairperson (and council members) with a specific agenda can detract from the focus of council and strain relationships
  - Some principals felt that the council believed their role was that of watchdog demanding accountability rather than providing advice
  - Some trustees recognized that principals were not bringing items to the council as directed or expected by the board
  - Some principals, especially those new in their position, felt they had too many other pressures and demands to devote time and energy to nurturing a council
  - There was a general feeling that parents advising professionals could/does pose a threat to the expert paradigm of the principal and the staff

Strategies for building relationship between council and the principal

- *Communication*—Practicing frank, honest, open and frequent communication is the key strategy.

- *Developing a shared vision of the contribution a council can make to the school*—Take the time to ensure that you are all serving the same defined purpose, and you have identified ways to work together.

- *Understanding and honouring roles and responsibilities*—Ensure that the council members stay within their mandate and focus on the whole school not individual issues. Likewise, make sure the principal is including the council in matters where they should be included.

- *Be patient*—Relationships are built over time, take the time required to develop a shared vision of the value a council can provide to a school.

- *Set building a relationship with the principal and staff as a council goal*—Collaboratively identify ways to strengthen the relationship, trust and communication between the school and the school council. Talk about it openly. Talk about it often.

- *Support value-added participation of the council by providing timely and effective information to the council*—Principals have a strong leadership role in developing respectful relationships. Sharing information effectively and openly is the key to respect.

Relationship between school councils and school boards

- For the most part, school council members were less concerned with their relationship between themselves and the board. The determining factor often was the level of development of the council and the level of the council. Elementary schools are generally more focused on their school while high schools (and more seasoned council members) tended to be more concerned with the education system.

- Having said that, there were councils that felt that there was significant room for improvement in the relationship—respect, trust, communication—between councils and boards.

- Participants felt that school councils who belonged to COSC's (Council of School Councils), ward councils, regional councils, or any way in which division schools came together, to meet with board and administration was a significant benefit to building relationships. Geography was cited as a major challenge in facilitating these meetings in larger rural jurisdictions.

  Schools that participate in COSC's, or other forms of convening school councils within districts, tended to have a clearer understanding of the complexities that face the board as the elected and accountable representatives for the administration of the school system. Coming together in a forum that provided for the meaningful exchange of information was a highly beneficial process for everyone involved. Like school council meetings, these events need to be strategically planned to ensure that information is provided in an effective manner and there is an opportunity for dialogue. The benefits of these meetings ranged from gaining an understanding of division-wide practices, policies and issues, to opportunities to learn from each other.

- Similar to the concept of the community representative, some participants were concerned about over-regulating school councils by mandating Council of School Councils. They felt the benefits of information sharing and board communication through the convening of joint meetings should be shared and COSC's did not need to be mandated.

Strategies for building relationship with the school board

- *Attendance and participation at school council meetings by a designated trustee*—Rural or suburban communities appear to have more direct relationships with their school boards, although there is interaction between single trustees and councils in all geographic regions. A surprising number of trustees throughout the province regularly attended school council meetings, with some trustees attending five or six council meetings each month. In the major centres this was not so common but trustees did state they were available to councils when invited. Having said this, there are councils that have never had a trustee attend their meeting. Several trustees and principals identified liaison between the board and the council as a responsibility of the principal.

- *Regional meetings*—The jurisdictions that used some form of regional meeting for the board to communicate with and consult with councils on matters of divisional significance believed that this was an extremely effective communication tool. Board members could not say enough about the benefits of the process.

- The elements of effective regional meetings are good planning, relevant topics, opportunities for exchange and strategic timing

- We want to stress that participants were not stuck on one specific model of regional meetings, but saw the importance of using a model that speaks to the uniqueness of each division. Once again, participants told us it was important to focus on the goal—learning and communication between councils—and less on mandating form

- *Accountability by the board leadership:* Some board members/chairpersons stated that taking personal responsibility for considering how school councils could be involved in specific issues was an important strategy.

Roles and Responsibilities

The discussion of roles and responsibilities was markedly complex, diverse, and multi-layered. The desired or actual sphere of involvement and influence varied significantly among councils and was dictated by a number of factors. For example, elementary school councils were generally more focused on the role of supporting programs and activities as their way of contributing to a positive school environment and enhancing learning, while high schools tended to focus on policy and broader issues.

- The advisory role of council was often the focal point of discussions regarding roles and responsibilities of school councils. A limited number of school council members hold the position that parents, as equal partners in their children's education, should participate fully in decisions that affect their school. Principals, trustees and many school council members were sensitive to this position, as parent members of councils are volunteers and councils are advisory. Several participants identified the fact that councils, although mandated by legislation, were not formally accountable to anyone as the rationale for their advisory role.

  This situation requires the constant focusing/refocusing on the purpose of school councils:

  > School councils *provide a forum* for parents, teachers, principals, students and (ideally) community members and the elected representatives to come together for genuine dialogue and collaboration regarding enhancing the education system—most predominantly at the local school level. By exploring issues from individual perspectives, each with an equal voice in the discussion, a council provides broad insights and ultimately advice about enhancing learning to the decision makers.

  Most participants feel that councils and principals for the most part understand and honour their mandated roles. The challenge is for all stakeholders to work together and clearly determine matters of significance to the schools and the school jurisdiction in which school councils could be appropriately involved. This requires skilful and strategic leadership by the principal and the board.

  Most chairpersons said that they met on a regular basis with the principal and jointly developed the agenda for the school council meeting. However, this was not always

seen as an effective process as it is still up to the principal to identify opportunities for council to be involved in matters of significance to the school.

- Almost all principals provided the school council with a written and verbal report each month. In fact, some principals used a large part of the meeting, detailing "everything" that happened in the last month. Then the council was able to choose where they wanted more information or discussion. In theory, this may sound inclusive. In practice, it can be overwhelming, time consuming and a ruse for meaningful involvement.

- One board chairperson identified the constant personal/leadership challenge of remembering to consider whether involvement by school councils was appropriate and meaningful in new or emerging issues. Other boards, especially in rural situations, sent everything to their councils—all policies, the budget review, etc. Too much involvement can also be ineffective in that it taxes the limited resources of a council. Strategic involvement in relevant areas is the key.

- Councils that do understand their mandate, but feel that the board and administration are not honouring or enabling an appropriate level of participation, experience frustration when:

    - Information is shared selectively, and not all the facts or the context is provided
    - They are excluded from processes in which they could legitimately be involved
    - Requests for input are made after the decision is made, or it is too late to have meaningful involvement
    - Being provided with the decision and never being asked for input
    - There is no avenue for communication between the board and councils

- Not all councils fully understand the scope of their potential involvement.

- Some principals have not made the transition to using council as an advisory body, and still rely on them as a fundraising body. In some schools there is ongoing conflict about who has control over the money.

- A very limited number of participants felt that "more teeth" in the regulation would ensure that boards and schools are mandated to involve councils in matters of significance to education and learning. A larger number of participants voiced concerns about over-regulating or mandating requirements. They felt that councils have come a long way in developing and did not need more rules. They did say that councils should be coached how to develop a clear understanding of purpose and outcomes and then use guidelines to "grow" to that end.

Some of the responsibilities identified in the process are:

- *Representing the voice of the school community*—A major concern to principals, trustees and, almost to the same degree, of councils is effectively engaging parents and the broader school community in discussions, i.e. seeking input from parents and school community, promoting the council's purpose, activities and results with parents and the school community and carrying out activities that further the purpose of the council. As mentioned previously, this concern stems from the limited number of parents that participate in school council activities and the importance of the issues that are brought

to the council for input or advice. It also stems from the situation that many councils do not practice accountability in representing the parent voice in that they become insular and don't reach out to gather insights on matters of significance to the school.

- *Focusing on the whole school*—The responsibility of a council is to be able to be representative of the larger school body and focus on growth and development of the school, not as a parent of a specific child or representing a specific interest. All three groups recognized this as a major challenge to councils.

- *Provide timely and appropriate information*—All three groups believed that an integral responsibility of the principal and the board was to seek advice on significant issues by providing appropriate information in a timely manner.

- *Boards have a responsibility to ensure council roles are uniform throughout the division*—Boards must take a proactive role in ensuring that all schools have the support they need to establish and sustain meaningful school councils.

Strategies to support strong relationships, and appropriate fulfilment of roles and responsibilities

- *Use information and education as an integral part of council operation*—New members, especially new chairpersons, stated that there was an extraordinarily steep learning curve when first becoming involved.
    - Orientation processes are essential
    - Use coaching and mentoring as a tool to bring along prospective executive members
    - Provide resources that are concise and easy to read
    - Councils of School Councils (or similar bodies) are an excellent way to share information and learn
    - Division-wide training or orientation processes have proved helpful
    - School boards can provide councils with copies of their policies that relate directly to the role of council and responsibilities of the board and the administration
    - Principals can fulfill an important role as interpreter of policies and initiatives

- *Identifying and communicating the level of involvement sought by council*—It is the responsibility of the board and the principal to clearly identify the level of involvement and decision making being sought for each situation, and of the council to identify the level of involvement at which they are willing and able to participate. For example, some councils want to be involved in policy review of all school board policies, some only want to be involved in reviewing policies that affect their school and others do not want to review policies but want to know when there is a change in policy.

  The table below, provided by the consultant, illustrates a spectrum of stakeholder involvement used in typical public participation processes. It demonstrates that there are varying levels of involvement in decision-making and different techniques used depending on the level of involvement. The table is reflective of the different types of involvement school councils in Alberta have in decisions affecting education, depending on the council, the principal and the issue at hand.

Informing	*Consulting or Involving*	*Collaborating*	*Empowering*
Provide stakeholders with comprehensive information that assists them in understanding the issues and the rationale for the decision.	Work directly with stakeholders in a manner to ensure that issues and the decision-making context are understood, input is consistently considered and feedback is provided.	Include stakeholders in all aspects of the decision process including identification of the issue, the design of the process, the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	Delegate decision-making and accountability to the stakeholders.
Type of decision making used (James Champy, Re-engineering Management)			
Decide and inform decision making Decision-maker (DM) makes the decision alone by using available information without sharing context or rationale.	*Consult and decide decision making* DM shares situation and gathers info, then makes decision.	*Consensus driven decision making* DM discusses situation with stakeholders and accepts the consensus of the group.	*Delegation of decision* DM determines that the decision will be made by others and that they will own the decision.

- *Strategic Planning as a tool for proactive assignment and identification of roles and responsibilities*—Councils that have taken the time to develop strategic plans and strategies that align with their focus benefit in a variety of ways:
  - They are better able to carry out activities that further the purpose of the council
  - They have strategies for seeking input from parents and the school community
  - They have a plan for effectively promoting council's purpose, activities and results with parents and the school community

- *Using division policies, constitution and bylaws as a tool to define and reaffirm roles and responsibilities*—Trustees acknowledged that policy and action by the Board would also be instrumental in enabling school councils. Principals and councils identified using the constitution and bylaws to direct and focus the roles and responsibilities of council as an effective tool.

- *Principals and trustees asking strategic and appropriate questions*—Several principals told us it was their role to ask good questions and provide quality information so that council members could respond appropriately. Principals who actively and strategically elicited the parent perspective on issues or ideas felt that council played an integral role in enhancing the school learning environment.

iv) Communication

Characteristic statements presented in Characteristics of Effective School Councils regarding Communication

- Promote the council's purpose, activities and results with parents and the larger school community

- Consult with principal on issues of interest to parents
- Seek input from parents and the school community
- Receive feedback on advice provided

Participants were asked:

- What are the characteristics or outcomes of meaningful input?
- What practices support meaningful input?
- What are the barriers to meaningful input?
- What typically is your communication processes between board, council and administration?
- How do you seek input from parents and the school community? What has worked well" What hasn't worked well?
- Do you receive feedback when you provide advice?

Discussion

Meaningful input

- The overarching goal of this consultation was to identify processes and practices, which support school council's ability to provide meaningful input in areas where they choose to be involved. To that end, we asked all participants to describe the characteristics of meaningful input or to identify the results of meaningful input.

  They said input is meaningful when:

  - *Council advice is considered in significant decisions affecting education and learning*—i.e.: Policy development, planning, staffing
  - *Parent input is sought and considered in the decision process*—Decision makers listen to perspectives and insights. Councils see evidence of input in the final decisions. Decision makers are provided with a broader range of insights to make decisions
  - *Council involvement is timely*—Input is sought at the beginning of the process or discussion
  - *Council members are able to participate in an informed conversation*—When councils are asked for input, they are provided with information or sources for information that enables a meaningful and informed discussion
  - *Decision making is transparent*—Councils understand how and why the decision was made
  - *Councils feel valued and valuable*—People leave meetings feeling satisfied and listened to and that their input actually made a difference
  - *Council members feel like equals on a team serving a common goal*—Insight and perspectives are valued, there is a synergy of people working together
  - *Dialogue is open and welcomes diverse opinions*—Lively debate and discussion regardless of whether it is positive or negative. Conflict is addressed and dealt with openly
  - *Diplomatic communication that is respectful of all parties is the norm*—The chairperson has a key role in defining and supporting positive communication

The barriers to meaningful input were identified as:

- *Time*—There is often not enough time to educate council members and to participate in thoughtful discussion

- *Unskilled facilitation and leadership*—Skillful discussion requires skillful leadership drawing out and honouring all voices
- *Lack of confidence and knowledge*—Parents do not feel knowledgeable or confident enough to provide insights
- *Lack of respect and trust*—Meaningful input is impossible if all parties do not respect and trust that everyone is serving the same purpose—enhancing learning
- *Vested interests*—Individual agendas (my child, my child's teacher, the class) can derail meaningful discussion by the council
- *Unfocused discussion*—Too much time devoted to unimportant details
- *Lack of interest*—Some councils are not interested in reviewing policies, finances or plans
- *Exclusion by presentation style*—Information is unnecessarily presented in a detailed, complicated and lengthy manner
- *Lack of accountability*—Does the information or request for information that is supposed to get to council, actually get to council?
- *Historical biases or entrenched attitudes*—All parties holding on to past experiences and not moving forward

Strategies to facilitate meaningful input by school councils

- *Training and education*—Ensure the chairperson has the skills to convene and facilitate a meaningful process.

- *Keep it simple*—Ensure that information is presented in plain English and in absorbable amounts.

- *Planning to enable participation in key decision points*—Work with the board and administration to identify timelines for input on key educational issues.

- *Allow time for discussion and dialogue*—Use structured agendas that do not use up time in insignificant detail.

- *Information sharing and learning:*
  - *Convening meetings of groups of school councils*—School council members, principals, and trustees who have participated in some form of convening as a larger group of school councils often stated it was the most meaningful experience they have had. While some divisions have highly organized and structured Council of School Councils (COSC's), others met on a semi-annual or annual basis. For example, in the larger jurisdictions some school councils had self-organized into feeder groups for a junior high or a high school. They came together to understand the transition process and often this group was a resource for recruiting council members for the next school council.

  - *Education and information*—Council members need information and education to participate in meaningful discussions. Providing advance notice of topics and clear, concise background information would increase members' familiarity with the issues and, in turn, increase their ability to provide meaningful input.

Communication processes between school, board and council

Communication between council and school administration

- Communication processes between councils and administration with good working relationships can be described with three adjectives—constant, informal and open.
- Regardless of type of communication, ranging from e-mail, to telephone to open door practices, council chairpersons and members with good relationships with their principal feel they are always welcomed by the principal.
- Communication in strained relationships tends to be more formal—written, scheduled, at meetings.

Communication between boards and councils

- Communication at this level was frequently described as sporadic, formal and one-sided (which is interesting in that a surprisingly large number of councils involved in the focus groups have trustees that attend every council meeting and present reports from the board).
- School divisions that use COSC's or some form of joint school council meetings found this to be an extremely effective way of communicating the divisional processes and priorities to councils.
- Some rural boards have traveling meetings so that school councils can meet with them. Distance is a major barrier to face-to-face communication between boards and councils.

Communication between councils and the larger school community

- Most councils rely heavily on the school newsletter as the key communication tool.
- Councils attend special events at the school to make presentations or have displays.
- Traditional processes for soliciting input:
  - Class representatives—somewhat problematic process because it was not clear whether their role was that of representative or liaison
  - Surveys on key issues
  - Discuss issues with parents informally at school.

Seeking input from parents and the school community

- As discussed previously, principals, councils and trustees feel that the role of actively seeking input from the broader school community is a core function of an effective school council. It is also an area that requires acknowledgement and significant development by councils.
- There is a concern about councils relying on themselves as representatives of the entire school community. The fallback position is that all parents are welcome to attend and if they choose not to, then the people in the room have the voice. Trustees and principals

are not fully comfortable with the level of involvement and some suggested that it is as much a responsibility to involve parents in their deliberation processes as it is for the board and administration to involve councils.

Strategies to facilitate seeking input from parents and the broader community

- *Do not rely on the newsletter*—Use a variety of strategies that focus on personal contact.
- *Hold special meetings on matters of significance*—The Alberta Commission on Learning is one example where many school councils organized and hosted opportunities for input by the broader community. Other examples include education forums and visioning sessions.
- *Use a well-structured, meaningful Annual General Meeting* as a tool for providing information and seeking feedback/direction from the larger parent community.
- *Bring speakers in to present relevant information and stimulate discussion* on matters of significance to education and education development.

Receiving feedback on input

- All three groups ranked this characteristic six or seventh in importance. Both trustees and principals felt they were doing well at providing feedback. However, many council members did not share this impression. In fact this characteristic had the greatest spread among the responses of all the characteristics, with over 20 of the 71 focus group participants (parent members of school councils) giving their boards and administration a rating of less than 5. This was especially true in receiving feedback from the board.
- Interestingly, upon reflection, a number of trustees recognized that they did not provide feedback to councils—and they should.
- Many council members did feel that they received feedback on input from their principals and most principals saw providing feedback as a key part of their role and responsibility. The quality of relationship did have an impact on the quality and amount of feedback received.

Strategies for facilitating effective feedback

- Principals and the board have a responsibility in providing timely and comprehensive feedback to school councils.

VIII. Conclusions

The ad hoc committee indicated that the information garnered in this study would be used in four ways:

a) To provide practical tangible advice, based on solid research from Alberta, to help and support the work of school councils.

b) As an accountability test: School councils were invented for the purpose of increasing involvement in schools. Is it happening?

c) For monitoring development/progress of councils—this information will provide a baseline for a follow-up effectiveness study in the future.

d) To inform policy development regarding school councils.

To facilitate the use of the information gathered in the consultation the concluding comments are organized around each of the four purpose statements.

a) To provide practical tangible advice, based on solid research from Alberta, to help and support the work of school councils

Strategies to facilitate increased effectiveness are included in each discussion of the Characteristics of Effective Councils. The strategies are examples of actions already being taken by school councils, administrators and school boards in their attempt to build effective and meaningful school councils.

In addition, each conversation ended by asking participants to provide one piece of advice on how to increase the effectiveness of school councils. The result was over two hundred pieces of advice (because no one gave just one piece). The advice listed below represents the general themes from the pieces of advice separated by stakeholder group.

Advice from school council members to improve the effectiveness of school councils

- *Focus on children and enhancing learning*—Tie everything you do back to the kids and enhancing education. Always remember why you are there.
- *Practice effective two-way communication*—Find ways to communicate the importance and the potential of school councils. Let people know that their voice as parents is very important to effective learning in schools. Provide information that is useable and accessible, condensed, and simple. Keep in touch with the needs of your parents and your students.
- *Learn from each other*—Take the opportunity to meet or connect with other schools, participate in a Council of School Councils or seek out mentor councils.
- *Increase participation*—Stimulate interest, get new people, new faces, and new ideas.
- *Participate in training*—Hold workshops to make sure everyone understands the roles and responsibility, the purpose and the processes involved. Use resources available for chairperson training.

- *Build relationships*—Establish an open, honest and trusting relationship with the administration and the board in the beginning. Make everyone feel really important and appreciated (valued and valuable). Validate what people are doing.

- *Use planning as a development tool*—Set specific short and long term goals based on a strategic plan developed for your school council. Setting up your infrastructure with your goals and terms of reference makes it easier to recruit.

- *Ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities*—Make a clear distinction between the fundraising arm and the advisory role. Establish clearly defined roles in a ***little*** booklet which is specific to your school.

- *Have engaging meetings*—Make sure the chairperson is effective, focused and has the skills to keep the group focused. Also, make sure meetings are structured to engage and sustain the participation of a broad range of representatives.

- *Hang in there*—It takes dedication and commitment to make a difference.

- *Plan for continuity*—Be deliberate at succession planning and use mentoring to ensure continuity on the council.

- *Be open to change and new ideas*—Do not get stagnant; change your executive and keep an open mind.

- *Be results and solution-oriented*—Do not get bogged down in fruitless discussion. Identify the issue and work towards a successful solution or resolution.

- *Make time for meaningful discussion about matters significant to education and learning*—Do not forget the purpose of council and get carried away with details or minutiae.

Advice from principals to improve the effectiveness of school councils

- *Look for varied ways to get input from parents*—
    - Work on communication strategies, and try to pursue different ways to get input from parents
    - Be creative
    - Do not rely on the school newsletter as the primary means of communication
    - Provide a personal contact
    - Use the phone and network
    - Get a feel for the heartbeat of the school community expectations and work towards meeting them

- *Be very clear on roles and responsibilities of a council and set goals*—Clearly establish and review the mandate, objectives to be achieved during the year. Actively dispel myths about the role of school council.

- *Build relationships*—Work very hard with the school, through the administrator, to create open honest and trusting relationships Be as open and transparent as possible

- *Get more involved in the global aspect of things*—Enable people to see the whole picture. Parents need to understand the limitations that individual schools are placed under, even with site-based management.

- *Use clear language to communicate*—Find a common language that does not exclude the average parent.

Advice from trustees to improve the effectiveness of school councils

- *Make the effort to understand your role*—
  - Access school board policy that outlines the jurisdiction position. Know the district policy and respond to it proactively
  - Get an in-service from someone who knows about school councils and their roles and responsibilities
  - Ensure you have a basic level of understanding of how things work and where there are opportunities is critical to meaningful involvement
  - Take the time up front to know what you are doing. If you don't have the context, you don't understand the impact you can have

- *Principals need to know policy and what is expected of them*—Everyone involved needs to know the school board policy and the role of the principal with school councils. Principals should focus on their own school and make sure a division perspective is provided.

- *The board has a key role to play in encouraging principals to give their councils a meaningful role.*

- *Councils need to provide representative voice*— A key aspect of being effective is being responsive and reflecting community values in the choices you make. "Remember what we think is important, isn't necessarily important to everyone." Value the diversity of opinions.

- *Relationships are key*—Partner and work collaboratively to respect and value and to look for ways to collaborate with respect to work that is going on at the school.

- *Communicate openly with the principal*—Lay out your expectations of what the council should be able to do, and reach an agreement with the principal on how it will work.

- *Councils must be included in the process early*—They have to be in the loop before decisions are made.

- *Align efforts with the school plan*—Make sure they have goals and objectives and plans that are aligned with school and district policies.

- *Communicate with larger school community*—Be visible in the community, talk to parents on a regular basis, take people's questions seriously. Let people know where they can go for advice, guide parents into ways to obtain advice. Do not be the gatekeeper of all the information.

b) As an accountability test: School councils were invented for the purpose of increasing involvement in schools. Is it happening?

Is there increased involvement in schools?

Increased involvement is the operative phrase. Is including a small number of parents increasingly in matters of significance in the education system the goal? Or, is the goal to involve more parents, or all parents, in the education system?

Without a doubt, one of the major themes was the question of the ability of a small number of parents to effectively represent the parent voice. One principal said, "It is not a meaningful body right now. If you have small school councils, even if they are effective, they aren't representative."

Many councils that attract five to ten members felt they were effective. They had an excellent relationship with the principal and staff and were actively involved in advising the principal and board on matters of significance to learning. The question remains, "Do they effectively represent the parent community?" Or moreover, "How can school councils effectively engage the larger school population to ensure their voice is representative?"

The second question around increased involvement relates to the scope of involvement. As stated several times, there is significant diversity in desired levels of involvement. For the most part, school councils are content (and have their hands full) dealing with their own school. However, other school councils, most specifically those active in Alberta Home and School Councils' Association (AHSCA) have a broader focus, and seek involvement at the jurisdiction and provincial levels.

The majority of participants were satisfied with the advisory role of school councils and felt it was important that councils were strategically involved in matters where they would have meaningful input. Learning how to do this effectively is a sufficient challenge for most school systems.

Councils that participate in a reflective process of visioning and goal setting are most effective in defining their desired scope of involvement. A strong message was that school councils should have the opportunity to self-determine their desire and readiness to increase their scope of involvement in the education system. Moreover, there should be resources in place to facilitate the education and development of all councils in this process.

c) For monitoring development/progress of councils—this information will provide a baseline for a follow-up effectiveness study in the future.

Section VII of this report identifies the indicators which councils, trustees and principals feel are most important, most effective and need most improvement. For the most part, there are strong commonalities between the three stakeholder groups.

In addition to the Characteristics of Effectiveness presented participants felt that the strong and focused leadership, continuity in the council, accepting responsibility for communication and

accountability to the larger school community, and informed discussion should be included as descriptors of effectiveness.

Participants felt that indicators of effectiveness need to be more explicit to provide clearer meaning. If the statement of purpose is clear, councils would be able to establish and maintain an appropriate focus for their efforts, and set clearly defined and achievable goals.

Finally, every school council in Alberta is at a different stage of development and has its own interpretation of what it means to support a positive learning environment in their school. Moreover, they value their autonomy and are cautious about being over-regulated by the government. They cautioned time and again that school councils are volunteer organizations and need to be recognized as such.

d) To inform policy development regarding school councils.

A strong message from participants was the need to focus on the goal or the desired outcome and not the form or structure, e.g. the goal of understanding the views of the broader community as opposed the mandatory participation of a community member. This advice applied to provincial policies and regulations as well as council operation. A few participants suggested that increased regulation or more teeth in the regulations were required. The majority of participants felt that in lieu of regulations, guidelines with an understanding of desired outcomes, and support for development of councils would be more effective.

There was a strong feeling that school boards need to take a more active role in facilitating effective councils in their jurisdictions. Some boards have excelled at creating a space for meaningful input by school councils. Others have left the responsibility to their principals, with varying degrees of success.

When participants were asked to provide advice in their closing comments, there was also advice provided for Alberta Learning:

- If Alberta Learning is serious about school councils then it must assume some accountability and responsibility and provide appropriate, effective, and user-friendly resources to support the development of council.
- When Alberta Learning implements programs, it needs to look at the differences between rural and urban areas.
- Encourage participation and welcome input.
- Don't over-regulate.
- Training needs to be accessible throughout Alberta.
- The province needs to get more widespread input from school council members about what they feel their responsibilities are. A minute group seems to confuse their role with that of the school board.

And finally to quote one board chairperson, "Their work is critically important, they need to persist—continue to talk about what they do, why it is important, talk about how it makes the

school, student and community stronger. School councils are a vehicle for bringing the community together in ways that can support kids and our public schools. Strong effective institutions are necessary; school councils can build community support."

IX. Recommendations for Going Forward

These consultations provided a wealth of information and advice on ways to enhance the roles and improve the effectiveness of school councils. The most critical concept to improving the effectiveness of school councils was that of *shared responsibility.* School councils are not parent councils. They are parents, administration, trustees and community, teacher and student representatives working together to enhance the learning system for the benefit of students. Therefore, responsibility for improving effectiveness lies with all stakeholders.

The first four recommendations are primarily intended for Alberta Learning and are of interest to the other stakeholders involved in the development and support of school councils.

1. *Honour the unique situation of each council*— School councils are voluntary bodies, in most cases very small voluntary bodies. Participants advise caution about creating an expectation that the volunteers in every school should be or want to be involved in all levels of education or all facets of education within their school. Councils should have the opportunity to understand the potential for their participation, and then be empowered to participate as they see fit.

2. *Minimize regulations and provide guidelines with rationale*—Most councils felt that guidelines with clear desired outcomes would be more beneficial than regulations. They did not feel that mandating requirements like community representatives, regional councils, or the three-year business plan was at all helpful. However, two of the 71 focus group participants felt "more teeth" in the regulations were required.

3. *Support the development of councils with appropriate resources*—"If Alberta Learning is serious about school councils then they must assume some accountability and responsibility in supporting the development of councils" was a very strong message in the consultation. It is important to update and enhance the current resource base with concise, current and accessible resources not only for councils, but also for principals and trustees.

4. *Ask and listen*—Alberta Learning should continue to solicit and listen to input from school councils in the province.

The next group of recommendations are intended for consideration by school jurisdictions.

5. *School boards and jurisdictions should actively foster and facilitate the creation and operation of effective empowered school councils*—There are a number of schools that do not have school councils; there are a number of school councils that are floundering; and there are a number of school councils that meet because, "it is the third Monday of the month," but have limited impact on enhancing learning in the school. In the interviews, a number of trustees reflected that perhaps there was a need for a more proactive role by the jurisdiction in supporting the development of effective school councils if only to ensure the effective use of resources. The creation and maintenance of school councils requires a significant commitment of time by all stakeholders,

especially the volunteers and the principals. It is important that this time is being put to good use and benefiting the school and the students.

In the way of an example, one school district in the study has a set of policies regarding school councils and the roles and responsibilities of the board and administration in interacting and supporting councils. These policies are circulated to every council to say, "This is our commitment to you." The councils in this jurisdiction are healthy, focused and have meaningful relationships with the board and the principal.

6. *Recognize and support the leadership role of the principal*—All discussions in this study identified the principal as the cornerstone of councils that function effectively. At a minimum, jurisdictions should be clearly articulating and communicating their expectations of the school principal in supporting and enabling authentic and meaningful participation of school councils in matters of significance to the school. Ideally, the division would provide mentoring, coaching and identify accountabilities for this role.

7. *Encourage the use of effective regional gatherings to share information*—A majority of school trustees stated that the most meaningful experience with school councils was when they met with them in some form of regional forum. The elements of effective regional meetings are good planning, relevant topics, opportunities and time for meaningful exchange, and appropriate timing.

8. *Ask meaningful questions to promote genuine dialogue and meaningful participation*—Boards and principals that have strong relationships with school councils, and can clearly articulate the value that councils provide, ask their councils strategic and purposeful questions to elicit insights and gather advice. When they ask questions, they provide information to support the discussion in a form that councils can understand and digest. They ask these questions in a timely manner and they tell the councils how their insights will be used. They do not ask questions about everything, and they do not ask questions where they know that council advice will not influence the decision. When they do ask questions they duly consider the advice or the response in the deliberation process and provide feedback to the councils on how it did influence the decision.

9. *Help councils to understand how and where they can be involved*—The average council member or council does not understand the range of opportunities that exist for council involvement in the learning system. While the responsibility for choosing areas of involvement lies with the council, most participants felt there is an essential leadership role for the board and the principal in informing and educating councils.

The balance of the recommendations refer to actions that councils can take to increase their effectiveness.

10. *Use a strategic planning process to develop a clear focus, define roles and set objectives*—Councils that have a clear sense of purpose and have established strategic focus areas believe and can see how they have a significant positive impact on learning and the school environment. They are also able to attract more participation because people know why they are there and what the expectations are.

    Setting objectives or strategic priorities that align with the key focus areas ensure that councils are carrying out activities that further the purpose of the council. Moreover, it ensures that the council does not get sidetracked by issues or pet projects.

11. *Effective meetings—*
    - *Utilize strong leadership to stay focused and effective—A* skilled, informed and effective chairperson who has a good working relationship with the principal and strong leadership skills is an essential element to an effective council. While few chairpersons come with those skills, it is important to understand and acquire them to fulfill his/her leadership role.

    - *Facilitate creative meetings that balance reporting with discussion, provide learning opportunities, and have defined outcomes*—People are busy. They want to know that their time is valued and they are doing something meaningful. It is not enough to have a list of reports. Meetings need to engage the members in a purposeful discussion that focuses on the school as a whole and ways to enhance the learning environment. Do not overwhelm (or bore) members with copious amounts of information.

12. *Succession planning*—The expectations and the learning curve of a chairperson and executive can be significant and a tremendous void can be left through turnover in the executive. Continuity of council is often achieved through strategic succession planning. In addition, succession planning facilitates effective turnover of executive positions.

13. *Participate in informed discussions and a utilize a problem solving approach*—Councils have a responsibility to ensure their time is invested in discussions in which they have the information required to make an informed decision and they are spending their time finding solutions by exploring and evaluating alternatives.

14. *Seek input from the broader school community*—The expectation that large numbers of parents will/should actively participate in school council, or that membership will be representative of the entire school community should be recognized as unrealistic. Instead, councils need to acknowledge that, like other volunteer organization, they will only attract a small number of interested and committed parents. However, councils do have a leadership responsibility to find ways to seek input from the broader school community on matters of significance to the school or the jurisdiction. Some participants suggested that this should be one of the key goals or objectives of every council because councils must always be reaching out to the broader community.

15. *Raise the awareness of the role and purpose of school council*—It is generally accepted, with a few exceptions, that the larger school community does not understand the role or purpose of school council. Newsletters are the number one vehicle for communicating and there really is no gauge as to their effectiveness. An effective way to raise the profile and awareness is to actually sponsor or host events that focus on the purpose of council—forums, education sessions, meet the teacher nights, and the annual general meeting. Some councils consistently use tangible examples of their involvement in planning sessions, policy development, staffing, etc. to increase the awareness of the role of council.

A closing recommendation for all stakeholders:

Build relationships—Strong and effective relationships that promote genuine respect, collaboration and authentic participation are critical to the success of school councils and it is the responsibility of all stakeholders to constantly work at developing them.

Appendix 1: Summary of Strategies for Improving Effectiveness

1. Strategies to support clarity of purpose, focus and goal setting

- *Provide concise and clear information to parents about the types of things that councils deal with regarding matters of significance to education*, i.e. policy, school planning etc. Provide tangible examples of actions and results.

- *Break the fundraising role perception*—Totally separate the two functions. People who sat on the fundraising organization did not belong to the school council and vice versa. Once they got past the fear of not having enough volunteers, they realized they were appealing to two different types of volunteers. Those that gave lip-service to establishing distinction by having two separate meetings on the same evening were not as successful at developing and sustaining clarity of purpose. Other participants suggested that councils were mature enough to manage both the advisory and the fundraising role and that school councils should challenge the direction from the government that they needed to be separated.

- *Use a variety of methods for sharing information*—
  - Do not rely on the newsletter as an effective means of getting your information out
  - Have a presence and make presentations at key school events
  - Use brochures or small handbooks that can provide a taste of the purpose of school councils
  - Provide testimonials from members about the effect the council has on the learning environment

- *Ask good, strategic questions of the parent body*—Illustrate the purpose, focus and goals of council by asking questions on matters of significance to the school.

- *Clearly identify the strategies that will be used to accomplish the goals*—Engage parents in meaningful, learning focused activities. Seek volunteer support to accomplish each specific goal.

- *Use planning as an outreach and focusing tool*—
  - It is important that the visioning, goal setting, strategy development process include genuine outreach to the broader school community. Having broader input into the direction setting, enabled council to proceed with some assurance that they were acting on behalf of the school community. Planning ensures that the council is in a position to provide timely input to key aspects of school and board operation
  - Councils have engaged the services of the local Business Development Corporation or Alberta Community Development to assist them in developing three-year plans
  - Some councils have held vision and mission retreats to identify their overarching purpose and goals and then annually identify strategies that would further the fulfilment of the goals

- *Have principals make presentations to councils outlining the three-year school plan*—Council can then decide where and how they can support enhancing student learning

and building a positive school environment by aligning their activities with the school plan.

- *Principal and councils can just sit down together to identify areas that they can work together in a spirit of trust and respect to support the school.*

- *Ensure sufficient flexibility*—Ability to respond to emerging issues is essential.

2. Strategies to address the membership/representation/involvement dilemma

- *Strategic recruitment*—
  - Some councils have recognized that it is not so much about the number of people involved as about strategically involving people who are active in and can represent specific voices from various parts of the school community. Identifying the range of voices—sports, arts, grade levels, and other interest areas and strategically recruiting through person to person invitation and identifying the potential mutual value is key to obtaining representative membership in an inclusive manner. While it is time consuming up front, the benefits far exceed the effort
  - "Be very clear about what commitment you want or need from people and then don't expand it once they are there"
  - Target male participation and make sure your meetings are meaningful to them

- *Value-added participation*—When members come for the first time, ensure they are engaged in something that is meaningful to them. Ask people what would be required for them to engage in the process.

- *Provide training and orientation processes* to reduce the learning curve and ensure people's time is valued.

- *Personal invitation*—Whether using a strategic recruitment process or not, personal invitation is imperative. Success has been achieved by inviting people to participate because they have something to contribute and, sometimes, helping them identify what that "something" is.

- *Using volunteers strategically*—One council coined the phrases "Marathoners and Sprinters". They identified the preferred level of involvement and utilized volunteers appropriately within that scope.

- *Start with one small job*—Inviting people to participate in some small, defined way is an excellent way to initiate them to council.

- *Using meetings that engage participants as a retention tool*—Councils experiencing success with involvement by parents, teachers, community representatives and students etc., and with retaining new members, attributed a large part of their success to the content and structure of their meetings:
  - Brief presentations providing opportunities to learn what is happening in the school and/or community
  - Opportunities to learn more about the education or learning system

- Meetings planned to focus on the goals of council and their implementation rather than rote agendas
- Meetings that focused on discussion rather than reporting
- ***Concise*** oral reports that evoke discussion
- Time for fun, food and community building
- Leadership by the chairperson and the principal in identifying a key discussion areas and asking effective questions
- Not getting caught up in minutia or issues outside of the scope or role of council
- Sub-committees to deal with implementation of strategies
- A segment of the agenda to deal with individual issues.

- *Credibility as a recruitment tool*—Participants stated that if the council was doing important work, the mere credibility of the process would attract valuable members.

- *We find ways to make it work*—Teams or co-representatives, rotating representation etc. The basic guideline is not to get hung up on rules, be clear on your goal ("Is your goal lots of members or is your goal meaningful participation?"), and be innovative.

- *Mentoring, education and succession planning to ensure continuity*—
  - Many participants felt that a turnover, or limited term, of the executive was positive, and necessary, as long as a mentoring and education process was in place to limit the learning curve of new executive
  - Some councils used communication with feeder schools' councils to identify and nurture potential members

3. Strategies for obtaining meaningful involvement of a community representative

- *Meeting a need*—Identify an area within the council focus and goals where there is a need specific support and going out and finding a person to fill that need.

- *Develop a partnership with a specific organization*—i.e.: the local community league, the local police force, the Recreation Board, the Child and Family Services Board, the Chamber of Commerce, the local parish.

- *Use the community network*—Strategically identify the skills and knowledge you want in a community member and then use the connections of the council members to find the right person.

- *Searching out passion*—Use networking to identify a non-parent who is passionate about education.

- *Community liaison officer*—In lieu of a community representative, one council has established a position of community liaison officer from its membership.

- *Value and honour the member once you have them*—A community representative can be a key asset to the council. Ensure they know that and that the council acknowledges it by how they utilize and treat the community representative.

4. **Strategies for building relationship between council and the principal**

   - *Communication*—Practicing frank, honest, open and frequent communication is the key strategy.

   - *Developing a shared vision of the contribution a council can make to the school*—Take the time to ensure that you are all serving the same defined purpose, and you have identified ways to work together.

   - *Understanding and honouring roles and responsibilities*—Ensure that the council members stay within their mandate and focus on the whole school not individual issues. Likewise, make sure the principal is including the council in matters where they should be included.

   - *Be patient*—Relationships are built over time, take the time required to develop a shared vision of the value a council can provide to a school.

   - *Set building a relationship with the principal and staff as a council goal*—Collaboratively identify ways to strengthen the relationship, trust, and communication between the school and the school council. Talk about it openly. Talk about it often.

   - *Support value-added participation of the council by providing timely and effective information to the council*—Principals have a strong leadership role in developing respectful relationships. Sharing information effectively and openly is key to respect.

5. **Strategies for building relationship with the school board**

   - *Attendance and participation at school council meetings by a designated trustee*—Rural or suburban communities appear to have more direct relationships with their school boards, although there is interaction between single trustees and councils in all geographic regions. A surprising number of trustees throughout the province regularly attended school council meetings, with some trustees attending five or six council meetings each month. In the major centres this was not so common but trustees did state they were available to councils when invited. Having said this, there are councils that have never had a trustee attend their meeting. Several trustees and principals identified liaison between the board and the council as a responsibility of the principal.

   - *Regional meetings*—The jurisdictions that used some form of regional meeting for the board to communicate with and consult with councils on matters of divisional significance believed that this was an extremely effective communication tool. Board members could not say enough about the benefits of the process.

     - The elements of effective regional meetings are good planning, relevant topics, opportunities for exchange and strategic timing

     - We want to stress that participants were not stuck on one specific model of regional meetings, but saw the importance of using a model that speaks to the uniqueness of each division. Once again, participants told us it was be important to focus on the goal—learning and communication between councils—and less on mandating form

- *Accountability by the board leadership:* Some board members/chairpersons stated that taking personal responsibility for considering how school councils could be involved in specific issues was an important strategy.

6. Strategies to support strong relationships and appropriate fulfilment of roles and responsibilities

- *Use information and education as an integral part of council operation*—New members, especially new chairpersons, stated that there was an extraordinarily steep learning curve when first becoming involved.
    - Orientation processes are essential
    - Use coaching and mentoring as a tool to bring along prospective executive members
    - Provide resources that are concise and easy to read
    - Councils of School Councils (or similar bodies) are an excellent way to share information and learn
    - Division-wide training or orientation processes have proved helpful
    - School boards can provide councils with copies of their policies that relate directly to the role of council and responsibilities of the board and the administration
    - Principals can fulfill an important role as interpreter of policies and initiatives

- *Identifying and communicating the level of involvement sought by council*—It is the responsibility of the board and the principal to clearly identify the level of involvement and decision making being sought for each situation, and of the council to identify the level of involvement at which they are willing and able to participate. For example, some councils want to be involved in policy review of all school board policies, some only want to be involved in reviewing policies that affect their school, and others do not want to review policies but want to know when there is a change in policy.

  The table below, provided by the consultant, illustrates a spectrum of stakeholder involvement used in typical public participation processes. It demonstrates that there are varying levels of involvement in decision-making, and different techniques used depending on the level of involvement. The table is reflective of the different types of involvement school councils in Alberta have in decisions affecting education, depending on the council, the principal and the issue at hand.

Informing	*Consulting or Involving*	*Collaborating*	*Empowering*
Provide stakeholders with comprehensive information that assists them in understanding the issues and the rationale for the decision.	Work directly with stakeholders in a manner to ensure that issues and the decision-making context are understood, input is consistently considered and feedback is provided.	Include stakeholders in all aspects of the decision process including identification of the issue, the design of the process, the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	Delegate decision-making and accountability to the stakeholders.
Type of decision making used (James Champy, Re-engineering Management)			
Informing	*Consulting or Involving*	*Collaborating*	*Empowering*
Decide and inform decision making Decision maker (DM) makes the decision alone by using available information without sharing context or rationale.	*Consult and decide decision making* DM shares situation and gathers info, then makes decision.	*Consensus driven decision making* DM discusses situation with stakeholders and accepts the consensus of the group.	*Delegation of decision* DM determines that the decision will be made by others and that they will own the decision.

- *Strategic Planning as a tool for proactive assignment and identification of roles and responsibilities*—Councils that have taken the time to develop strategic plans and strategies that align with their focus benefit in a variety of ways:
  - They are better able to carry out activities that further the purpose of the council
  - They have strategies for seeking input from parents and the school community
  - They have a plan for effectively promoting council's purpose, activities and results with parents and the school community

- *Using division policies, constitution and bylaws as a tool to define and reaffirm roles and responsibilities*—Trustees acknowledged that policy and action by the board would also be instrumental in enabling school councils. Principals and councils identified using the constitution and bylaws to direct and focus the roles and responsibilities of council as an effective tool.

- *Principals and trustees asking strategic and appropriate questions*—Several principals told us it was their role to ask good questions and provide quality information so that council members could respond appropriately. Principals who actively and strategically elicited the parent perspective on issues or ideas felt that council played an integral role in enhancing the school learning environment.

7. Strategies to facilitate meaningful input by school councils

- *Training and education*—Ensure the chairperson has the skills to convene and facilitate a meaningful process.

- *Keep it simple*—Ensure that information is presented in plain English and in absorbable amounts.

- *Planning to enable participation in key decision points*—Work with the board and administration to identify timelines for input on key educational issues.

- *Allow time for discussion and dialogue*—Use structured agendas that do not use up time in insignificant detail.

- *Information sharing and learning:*
    - *Convening meetings of groups of school councils*—School council members, principals, and trustees who have participated in some form of convening as a larger group of school councils often stated it was the most meaningful experience they have had. While some divisions have highly organized and structured Council of School Councils (COSC's), others met on a semi-annual or annual basis. For example, in the larger jurisdictions some school councils had self-organized into feeder groups for a junior high or a high school. They came together to understand the transition process and often this group was a resource for recruiting council members for the next school council.

    - *Education and information*—Council members need information and education to participate in meaningful discussions. Providing advance notice of topics and clear, concise background information would increase members' familiarity with the issues and, in turn, increase their ability to provide meaningful input.

8. Strategies to facilitate seeking input from parents and the broader community

- *Don't rely on the newsletter*—Use a variety of strategies that focus on personal contact.

- *Hold special meetings on matters of significance*—The Alberta Commission on Learning is one example where many school councils organized and hosted opportunities for input by the broader community. Other examples include education forums and visioning sessions.

- *Use a well-structured, meaningful Annual General Meeting* as a tool for providing information and seeking feedback/direction from the larger parent community.

- *Bring speakers in to present relevant information and stimulate discussion* on matters of significance to education and education development.

9. Strategies for facilitating effective feedback

- *Principals and the board have a responsibility in providing timely and comprehensive feedback to school councils.*

Appendix 2: Assessment of School Council Effectiveness by Participant Groups

School Council Members

Most Important Characteristics (page 20)	Where Councils are Doing Well (page 20)	Areas for Improvement (pages 20 & 21)
Seek input from parents and school community	Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	Membership is representative of the entire school community
Respect the roles and responsibilities of and cooperate with others	Respect the roles and responsibilities of and cooperate with others	Have an appropriate focus
Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	Have clearly defined and achievable goals
Have an appropriate focus	Consult with principal on issues of interest to parents	Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities
Inclusive membership recruitment process	Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council	Inclusive membership recruitment process

Principals

Most Important Characteristics (page 20)	Where Councils are Doing Well (page 20)	Areas for Improvement (pages 20 & 21)
Seek input from parents and the school community	Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	Seek input from parents and school community
Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	Have an appropriate focus
Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities	Inclusive membership recruitment process	Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council
Have an appropriate focus	Respect the roles and responsibilities of and cooperate with others	Promote the councils purpose, activities, and results with parents and school community
Have clearly defined and achievable goals	Receive feedback on input provided	Have clearly defined and achievable goals

Trustees

Most Important Characteristics (page 20)	Where Councils are Doing Well (page 20)	Areas for Improvement (pages 20 & 21)
Have clearly defined and achievable goals	Respect the roles and responsibilities of and cooperate with others	Membership is representative of the entire school community
Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	Inclusive membership recruitment process
Seek input from parents and the school community	Have an appropriate focus	Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council
Have an appropriate focus	Have clearly defined and achievable goals	Seek input from parents and school community
Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	Receive feedback on input provided	Promote the council's purpose, activities and results with parents and the school community

Appendix 3: Data Gathering Instrument for Focus Groups and Interviews

Characteristics of an Effective School Council	How	Not									Very
Have a clearly defined and achievable goals	**Important is it?**										
	Well are you doing?										
Have an appropriate focus	**Important**										
	Well										
Membership is representative of the entire school community	**Important**										
	Well										
Inclusive membership recruitment process	**Important**										
	Well										
Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities	**Important**										
	Well										
Establish constructive relationships with principal and board	**Important**										
	Well										
Carry out activities that further the purpose of the council	**Important**										
	Well										
Provide advice to the principal and board on important matters	**Important**										
	Well										
Respect the roles and responsibility of and cooperate with others	**Important**										
	Well										
Promote the council's purpose, activities and results with parents and school community	**Important**										
	Well										
Consult with principal on issues of interest to parents	**Important**										
	Well										
Seek input from parents and school community	**Important**										
	Well										
Receive feedback on input provided	**Important**										
	Well										